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THE LURE OF THE LITTLE DRUM

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THE LURE OF THE LITTLE DRUM

By

MARGARET PETERSON

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PROLOGUE

DUST AND SUN

Passionate particles of dust and sun,
Run your brief race, nor ask why it is run.
We are but shadow pictures, voices, dreams ;
Perchance they make, and break us—just for fun.

Richard Le Gallienne.

A DINGY small room in a back slum of Soho. The one window so thickly shadowed with dust and a pair of dirty curtains that the light, faint and misty as it was outside, was here scarce able to penetrate at all. Rain had fallen all day, now as night crept over the city it still splashed and trickled on the slushy pavements, down the sides and fronts of the grey smoke-blurred houses.

The house in which the room was situated, grey and squalid like its fellows, boasted of a French restaurant on the ground floor. The “Venez Manger” was its high sounding title, and indeed to the best of Madam’s ability the cuisine of the place seconded this invitation. Here there was always plenty to eat, the scent and savour of it permeated the surrounding atmosphere, and, from eight of an evening onwards, flowed out of its one narrow door down the street to mix and mingle with the many other scents of Soho.

So much for Madam's restaurant. She herself, a stout but withal briskly moving Frenchwoman, her hair done into shining curls surrounding a brown face, from which looked out a couple of keen bead-like eyes, superintended the comings and goings of her guests downstairs from behind a higher counter set in the corner of the opening door. No guest arrived without a "Bon soir, Monsieur" or "Madame"; and no guest, one may be very certain of that, left without paying his or her just fee.

Madam made a comfortable living out of her "Venez Manger" restaurant; perhaps something in the persuasiveness of the name—of which she was justly proud—had something to do with its popularity. She made also in the renting out of the top rooms of her establishment to women, from whom, if luck was with her and them, she could extort fabulous sums. Unfortunate women, driven pitilessly from pillar to post, paying willingly all the money they could raise for the privilege of being allowed to rest a little while under the sanctuary, one might almost say the respectability of Madam's roof.

Sometimes, of course, such is the fate of all trades, Madam made a mistake and drove a bad bargain, such for instance as the present occupant of the tiny room, number five, on the fifth floor. In this case the woman had chosen, so it would appear, to rent Madam's room for the sole and express purpose of departing this life in it. That in itself was annoyance sufficient to ruffle the breast of any landlady, but when one took in connection with it the fact that she had palpably been driven to her last stand and was dying much as a rat in a hole, without friends or money to purchase a landlady's friendship, the case was even worse. No friends, true enough, Madam

thought bitterly, but at the same time the Miserable of No. 5 had brought with her an encumbrance in the shape of a young girl. Her daughter it would appear, who though incapable of providing money for the rent still desired to be fed, almost claimed charity in fact, since one cannot let a cat, much less a human being, starve to death in one's own house. No, the case, as Madam admitted to Louise, her right-hand and assistant in the restaurant trade, was about as bad as it could be, a *peste* on the fact that she had ever taken the woman in. But since she was here and so palpably dying, a certain amount of charity, not altogether obliterated in a heart that had once been kind, prevented Madam from ejecting her unwelcome lodgers into the street.

Indeed it is to be noted to her credit, that as she somewhat ruefully ascended the sharp flight of stairs on this dreary evening in November, and paused to knock at the door of No. 5, she carried in her hand a bowl of steaming soup. Her knock fell on silence and for a second or two was treated with silence, then a quick light step was heard and the door was opened a little, almost timidly, as if the opener feared what might greet her on the threshold. Reassured by the sight of Madam's portly figure, or perhaps tempted by the savoury steam from the soup, the door was opened a little wider, disclosing a young girl, who stood so facing Madam, one hand still on the door handle blocking, so it seemed, entrance or sight into the room. The dim light of the one gas jet in the passage flickered as the draught from the door shook it; the girl's features and form were hardly distinguishable from the surrounding gloom, only her face showed white and her hair was visibly startlingly golden.

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice stiff and unapproachable.

"I have brought some broth for the mother," Madam explained brusquely. It was another of her grievances that this slim slip of a girl showed no gratitude only a proud dislike of her surroundings. "How is it with her this evening?"

The girl moved slightly; it appeared as if she released for a moment from her stiff on-guard attitude. Perhaps she had expected something different from Madam's visit; just lately she had grown woefully acquainted with how best to repulse a natural request for payment from the people with whom they lodged.

"She is a little better, I think," she answered Madam's question. "Just now she seems to sleep, It is kind of you to have thought of her."

She moved a little from the door; it was scarcely an invitation to come in, but Madam took it. She stepped brusquely into the room, and putting the bowl of soup down on the centre table moved across to the bed in the corner. A woman lay stretched full length on it; the sheet pulled up to her chin, her face sideways on the pillow. By the bedside was a little round table, on which stood a guttering candle, the only light in the room. Its jerking flame threw strange shadows on the woman's face: her eyes were shut, the lips drawn back from her teeth seemed set in a curiously sardonic grin.

Madam stood looking down at her in silence; she was no stranger to Death, having seen him at close quarters more than once in the course of her stormy life. With this woman, for instance, it could scarcely be a matter of hours now, she saw that at once. The girl had moved to

the bedside too ; she spoke now, singularly impassively, as if the woman on the bed were some stranger to her.

"How do you think she is ? " she asked. . "She has lain like that all afternoon ; does it mean she sleeps ? "

Madam glanced up at her, she had no liking for either of her guests and little pity, yet her voice tried to be kind as she answered—

"It means, my girl," she said, "that the soup will be of no use to her. Eat it, you, who are still young and alive enough to need food."

The girl did not move. "She is dying, you mean ? " she asked.

Madam shrugged her shoulders, she could make nothing of this daughter, so calm, so immovable. Her tone changed somewhat brutally.

"She is practically dead" she answered. "*Voyons*, it is to me most annoying. A death in the house and all the neighbours curious to know."

"I am sorry," said the girl ; still she stood stiffly while Madam moved over to the window, and putting the curtain aside, peered out into the fast deepening night.

"And you," Madam went on, turning to face the bed again, "You, what will you do ? I cannot keep you for ever and feed you. After she has gone," she nodded grimly at the silent figure on the bed, "you must go too, find work, get money. Perhaps I can help you, you are too young—" she paused, her quick bead-like eyes appraised the girl's face and figure, "too pretty to live on charity."

Apparently some consolation to her mercenary mind had been gathered from that reflection, for her voice, when she continued, had won back almost to friendliness ;

she came across the room and taking one of the girl's limp hands in hers patted it. "But there, poor thing, to-night at least we will not talk of payment. I go to fetch a doctor, since, though he can do no good, it were expedient he were here, and you, eat you the soup as I have said, 'tis a sick heart that plans on an empty stomach."

She went on that, the girl watching her departure with steady unreadable eyes. Not till the Frenchwoman's heavy footsteps had died away on the stairs did she move, then almost automatically she went across to the table on which the bowl of soup stood, and sitting down pulled it towards her.

"I am hungry," she spoke to herself in a whisper, "hungry, I must eat. There is nothing in me that feels or cares for anything so long as I am hungry." Yet half-way through the unappetising meal the sobs choked her, and pushing the bowl away from her she laid her head down on the table and wept unrestrainedly.

The candle-flame flickered and danced, it was burning low, little white heaps of grease collecting at its base and down the edges of the candlestick. The woman's face on the pillow remained unchanged, only the faint flutter of her breath as it came and went showing her still alive; the girl with head down on the table sobbed on hopelessly, like a tired child.

Some clock outside in the neighbourhood struck nine, from downstairs the rattle of china and knives and forks was plainly audible, the work of the restaurant was in full swing. Just as the candle, burning the more brightly as its end drew near, threw up a long thin flame, the woman on the bed moved, slowly, as if waking from some long deep sleep, turning in the bed, stretching to her full

length, her eyes wide open staring into the room. There was no bewilderment in the glance, it was as if she had been for hours awake and planning something. Her eyes took in the figure of the girl in their search round the room and stayed there.

"Esther," she called, her voice not faint or undecided, "Esther, come here. I have got such a lot to say and such a short time to say it in."

The girl stood up hurriedly, brushing her hands across her face, staring at her mother with frightened eyes. The woman on the bed half smiled.

"You have been crying, I believe, Esther," she said; "do you know I haven't seen you do that since you first grew up and learned to know a thing or two. It can't be because I am dying, can it? Come over here, anyway, I want to say a few things to you, a little good advice, the only good thing I have ever given you in your life."

At her mother's first half-mocking words Esther's face stiffened, the impassiveness which Madam so much disliked settled back on it like a mask; she moved across, however, and stood by the bed obediently. The woman put out one weak hand and caught hers.

"Kneel down," she said, "you are nearer that way and don't look so stiff and straight. Poor Esther, how you have disapproved of me since you got to know me, haven't you? Funny that you should, too, because you are very like me, hopelessly like, I should say. That is what I want to talk about—the room is very dark, isn't it? just as well perhaps for my story."

Her voice with each disconnected sentence grew weaker; it dropped finally to a whisper. Esther knelt down by the bed, putting the table a little to one side and

slipping one arm under the pillow, so as to raise the woman's head a little.

"Don't bother to talk, mother. I understand, and indeed it is not true that I have disapproved, only sometimes——" her voice broke, the woman put up a hand and touched the young cheek so near her own softly.

"No, you have never understood, dear," she contradicted, "you have only thought you did."

For a while they stayed silent; the woman's strength was ebbing rapidly, she had to use it carefully, that she knew.

"You remember that letter I wrote the other day, don't you, Esther?" she asked presently.

"Yes, mother," the girl answered, "to your sister out in India, you mean; we sent it off four weeks ago."

"Yes, that was it. Four weeks ago; the answer should be here shortly. Esther, I want you to promise me that when it comes you will abide by it. I want," her voice gathered strength, she sat up straight, free from Esther's supporting arm, "I want you to have your chance. I have never given it you yet. You ought never to have been born; what is there in my life which I can hand down?—every page and chapter of it is unclean and soiled. But you, you, if I could lift you from it, start you fair, give you your chance?" She turned, catching at her daughter's face, peering into the girl's wide, startled eyes. "Promise me, promise me, I can't die and leave you to be dragged further into the filth of my life."

Her hold weakened, she lay back on the pillow, her heart panting for life in every breath that struggled backwards and forwards.

"What is it you want me to do?" asked Esther. The force of her mother's tragic pleading hardly seemed to have touched her, she had grown hardened to monthly scenes of repentance and wild railings against life.

"I want you to go back with your aunt to India, when she comes to fetch you." The woman spoke more calmly now. "I want you to wipe me and your life with me out of your memory. Or if you must remember, Esther—you have always been singularly incapable of forgetting things—let it be with just a shade of pity and forgiveness. You will not understand now, I pray you may never learn through your own weakness, how little all that has gone to the breaking of the good in me has been my fault. Will you promise me?"

For one second Madam's fat trim figure and beady eyes as she had stood saying "You are too young, too pretty," flashed across Esther's mind. That perhaps swayed in the balance with her mother's pleading. "I promise!" she agreed, and on that was silent, though her heart clamoured to find words in which to tell her mother of the love and pity that had always been there for her. She felt almost as if turned to stone.

The woman on the bed, watching her, sighed, then her eyes looking past her daughter's bent head caught sight of the candle spluttering now to its last end, and she laughed, a funny tinkling laugh, that for the moment made her face almost young again.

"I am going out, Esther, just like the candle. All splutter and dirty grease and then the dark." The word seemed to wake some terror in her thoughts, she sat up straight again, her face, fallen into awful lines of fear. "The dark," she whispered, "the dark. God how I am

afraid of the dark! God! God!" her voice screamed, broke off, and screamed again, wild wordless fear.

Esther rose quickly to her feet, not as quickly as the end came though, for with one final shrieking sob of terror the woman's body lurched forward on the bed, fell sideways, one of her limp hands striking the floor, just as the candle burnt low to its core, sputtered and went out.

And through the dark, somehow she never thought of looking for matches and striking a light, Esther felt for and found her mother's face and knew from the cold chill dampness of it that she was dead.

CHAPTER I

“Love came ! and lo, a rainbow spanned his room.
He dreamt he saw the world as it should be,
He saw it as no other eyes might see.”

GERALD HAMILTON lifted a puzzled face and gazed at his sister-in-law. His clear brown eyes, flecked here and there with green—attractive eyes that looked at you frankly and gave as they asked : truth—were to-day troubled and a little uncertain. His boyish face was overclouded by some shadow of depression very foreign to its habitually cheerful facing of life’s problems. Gerald Hamilton was, in fact, in love, and troubled therewith. The first complaint was no uncommon one. His sister-in-law, who sat opposite him now, her straight slim figure comfortably settled in the depths of an armchair, a piece of absolutely useless sewing in her hands, found it in her heart to smile at that side of the trouble. Gerald, bless the dear boy, had so often been in love. She had been the recipient of so many of his—for the time being—poignantly felt emotions. A girl had merely to be young, the possessor of blue eyes, fluffy hair, and an appealing expression for Gerald to lay at once and unasked an impressionable heart at her feet.

But this time the trouble went deeper. Mrs. Hamilton, watching from behind a scrupulously inattentive exterior, was conscious of that fact. Some unknown force, such

as she had not before encountered in the boy, was awake, his puzzled frown, his shadow-flecked eyes, all gave her that impression.

They sat together on either side of the fireplace in the Hamiltons' cosily furnished drawing-room. The Hamiltons, wherever they were, always had everything very comfortable. Just at present he happened to be Commissioner of Police in the small hill station of Shillong, in the northwest of India, but one could have imagined, judging from the inside of Mrs. Hamilton's drawing-room, that one had just that moment stepped from a taxicab somewhere in the neighbourhood of Kensington and been ushered into the dainty comfort of a bijou flat. Such was Mrs. Hamilton's boast. She had to live in India, because her husband's work lay out there, but as much as possible—almost entirely from her drawing-room—did she shut out the native world. Up in a hill station this was easier to achieve than in her larger palace world of Calcutta, for the climate leant itself more readily to the pretence. English roses nodded in the glass vases, a small fire burnt on the hearth, the glimpse of garden seen from the window had the freshness and greenness of an English spring.

‘ Mrs. Hamilton hated India and its people, though the expression of that rarely rose beyond the surface of her placid lips. After all, Jack's work and life lay here, her life lay with Jack ; but none the less she hated it, had shrunk from its scents and colours and hard brightness ever since the day when she had stood by a hastily dug grave in the heart of an Indian jungle and watched a pitifully small coffin being lowered in by unskilful native hands. Her face even now, and ten years had slipped by since that day, would whiten at the scent or sight of

native flowers, the jasmine, the heavy dhatura lilies. Those flowers had lain in and round the small mound, the memory of them hit at her heart like a blow. And so she hated India, with a hatred that lessened not at all because it was never voiced.

And Gerald Hamilton had discovered her secret very soon after he had arrived in India to join his regiment—that perhaps accounted for the hesitation in his speech when he next spoke.

"I am telling you about it, Marjorie," he said, "because—"

"Because you always bring your troubles to me," Mrs. Hamilton interrupted; she looked across at him and smiled.

He answered her smile, but his eyes did not lighten; rather the trouble in them intensified.

"Yes, that is one reason," he assented; "but there is a deeper one as well. It is because I know you will feel like I do about the whole wretched matter."

He rose to his feet, moving with rather clumsy fingers the ornaments on the mantelpiece. Mrs. Hamilton bent her head over her sewing.

"Tell me more, Babe," she prompted gently, "I go out so little, I know nothing of the scandal of the place. This girl, Miss Williams, I remember meeting her. She is Mrs. Bullock's niece, isn't she? Rather an awful aunt, one has to admit, but that need not affect the girl. And people are not nice to her, is that the trouble? I suppose they rather resent Mrs. Bullock trying to push her into society; you know, dear boy, the club always has drawn the line at those tea-planter folk."

"That has got nothing to do with it." Young Hamil-

ton flung himself back in his chair, and stretched out a pair of beautifully besocked feet to the fire. "It is much worse than that, Marjorie."

There was a moment's silence. Gerald contemplated the colours of his socks, Mrs. Hamilton completed one dainty tuck and started on another.

"Do you know Ishaq Khan?" Gerald asked presently; he did not lift his eyes to look at her.

Mrs. Hamilton glanced up in surprise, also a faint frown of annoyance stirred on her face. She knew Ishaq Khan, he was part of the world she so much hated and so much avoided. But not only did she know Ishaq Khan, she knew of him, which is sometimes worse. Ishaq Khan was a rich, comparatively young, influential native, a prince moreover in his own right of the small state of Bholpur. He had been sent to England early in life by an ambitious old father who was anxious that his son should acquire that mixture of English polish and manner so dear to a certain type of native in India. Ishaq Khan had done Oxford, the stamp of it was on him, in his easy unaffected voice, in his polite urbane manners. But behind this European polish lay the subtle native mind, that curious blending which is the result of East and West mixing. Vice, which is no vice in its primaeva setting, but becomes so when it is embedded in the mind of an Oxford trained, European planned gentleman. He had, in fact, a reputation which was popular with neither the European nor native community.

"If that man ever asks you to dance with him," Mrs. Hamilton's husband had once said to her, "there will be a row."

"I don't think you need have any fear of that," she

had answered quietly, and Mr. Hamilton had looked at her, conscious for a second—luckily he was rarely that—of the cold antagonism that lay behind his wife's polite ignoring of the world around her.

"I know him," she said now, in answer to her brother-in-law's question; "but what has he got to do with it, Gerald?"

The young man moved restlessly, in fact he stood up again, and plunging both hands in his pockets took the bull by the horns, so to speak.

"He is it altogether," he said, somewhat cryptically. Yet it seemed Mrs. Hamilton understood. What she knew of Ishaq Khan perhaps helped her, he had an unsavoury reputation where women were concerned.

"Oh," she answered. Her head bent quickly over her work, a slow flush crept into her cheeks. "I don't quite see what I can do in that case, Gerald."

"That is just it, Marjorie, you can do so much if you only will." The boy was well into his stride now. "Don't you understand, she is so young, the girl, she does not know what she is doing. She has never been in India before, what does she know of natives? To her he is something rather romantic and wonderful, she is sorry for him because the rest of us snub him, I suppose. But you, Marjorie, you know, you understand, can't you help her, tell her, do something? Oh, for God's sake, Marge," his voice rang hoarse with the feeling that lay behind the words, "help her, help her, for I love her, and she is messing up the whole of her life while Shillong sits round and watches." He moved abruptly over to the window, he was very young, very much in earnest, and afraid

perhaps that she should see how near he was to making a fool of himself.

Mrs. Hamilton laid aside her work and stood up. This was a problem that had to be faced seriously and quietly. There was more behind it than just one of Gerald's attacks of lovesickness. As she rose, her eyes fell on a large photograph that occupied a central position on the mantelpiece. It was that of a small boy, chubby and healthy, the picture was colour-tinted. The round pink cheeks glowed, very brown eyes flecked with green laughed at her. Mrs. Hamilton put two hands on the mantelpiece and bent to study the picture. It was because those eyes, that straight frank look, were so like Gerald that she loved her brother-in-law, that she had always known. Bobby would have been a man very like his uncle if—that if always brought her up against a stone wall. Yet her eyes were wonderfully soft as she stood up straight again and turned to face Gerald's miserable back.

"Come here, boy," she called softly, "and let us think what can be done. Of course I will help; is there anything I wouldn't do for you? But first and foremost, can't the aunt do anything, does she take no interest in the girl?"

Gerald turned and came across the room to her, the green in his eyes was perhaps a little blurred, but he had succeeded in stumping up a smile.

"Mrs. Bullock," he announced somewhat definitely, "is a walking idiot. She is no manner of use. And the other ladies have always disliked Miss Williams, I think you have noticed that."

"She is too pretty," Mrs. Hamilton nodded in agreement, "to be really popular with the fair sex." Another

reason she held reserved at the back of her mind : what was the good of hurting Gerald's feelings ?

" Yes, that is it," he assented eagerly, " and it is his chance, don't you see. Why, Mrs. Callum actually said to me yesterday : ' I have told Mabel and Cynthia that they are not to know Miss Williams in future, there are some things at which one must draw the line, and flirting with a native is one.' " His voice rang bitter against Mrs. Callum. Mrs. Hamilton shivered slightly, she was conscious that she rather sympathized with the worthy lady. Her voice, however, was steady and friendly.

" Well, I don't know the girl very well," she admitted ; " but that does not sound the right way to treat her. I'll see what I can do ; perhaps Jack would let me have her here for a bit."

Gerald's face lit up wonderfully. " You are a brick, Marjorie, it is what I was driving at," he assented frankly ; " you see while she is here Ishaq Khan must leave her alone, he can hardly interfere with some one staying in your house."

" No," Mrs. Hamilton agreed, " I hardly think he will try to. And that is agreed, I will do what I can. But, Gerald, I am not sure, dear, that I want you to marry the girl, even though I do not want her to make a mess of her life with Ishaq Khan."

" I would marry her to-morrow, if she would have me," he answered gravely ; " but she won't, Marjorie."

His mouth was grave, his eyes serious, he seemed somehow to have grown older. Mrs. Hamilton felt a touch of regret, he had been so more than lovable as a boy. She followed him out into the verandah and helped him on with his coat. Outside, in the still cool evening,

his pony stood, the native sais squatting half asleep at its head. A very red sun was dropping down behind the far distant snows, throwing a faint red glamour over the mountains and the western sky.

"Are you coming clubwards?" Gerald asked, turning on the steps to call back to her where she stood, a faint white shape in the dusk of the door.

"No," she answered slowly, "it is Jack's late night to-night. I generally wait in for him, and then we are both too lazy to move out again."

"I see," laughed Gerald. He swung himself into his saddle and waved his hand in farewell. "Give him my respects, and—good-night, Marjorie," he called, as the pony felt its way down the steep stony drive.

Mrs. Hamilton went back to the drawing-room and unfolded her work, yet she did very few stitches, her brow was puckered in thought, her mind was more than a little troubled over Gerald's problem. She had seen very little of Miss Williams, as she had told her brother-in-law, but the times that she had met her remained in her thoughts like vivid pictures. Miss Williams was surprisingly beautiful. Mrs. Hamilton had been the first to admit that on the girl's arrival in Shillong. Tall and slight, yet withal softly rounded in figure, she was perfect from the tips of her small finely shaped feet to the last little outstanding strand of pure gold that crowned her head. A dainty face, wide blue eyes shadowed by long lashes, an alluring mouth, a chin faintly flushed with pink thrown up by contrast with the very white neck. Her eyes were full of messages, strange unfinished moods that made you long to catch and know their meaning; but the small mouth was habitually silent. Miss Williams

had no small talk, it almost seemed as if the need for speech never entered her mind, her eyes did all the talking for her. And what did those eyes mean, what hide ?

Jack Hamilton came into the room a little later on bringing a draught of fresh air and a rustling newspaper with him. His wife was sitting very quiet, watching the fire, it had grown by now too dark to sew. Hamilton's eyes went swiftly from his wife's head to the picture on the mantelpiece and back again ; his voice when he spoke carried with it rather a forced effort at cheeriness.

" Feeling blue, Marjorie ? Why no lights and this reverie ? "

Mrs. Hamilton looked up smiling ; she knew just the journey that his thoughts had gone.

" No, I am not blue, Jack, just worried over something, and I hardly noticed how dark it grew. Ring the bell for tea and lights."

Jack gave a visible sigh of relief, also he rang the bell and took his accustomed place, his back to the fire, his feet apart, his paper rustling in his hands.

" What's wrong ? " he asked during the pause in which soft-footed native servants padded in with tea and lights.

" I will tell you after tea," announced Mrs. Hamilton ; " it has something to do with Gerald."

" That brother of mine," Jack Hamilton smiled largely and accepted his teacup, " don't let that young scamp worry you. In love again, I suppose."

" Yes," Mrs. Hamilton's eyes were back on the fire ; " but this time it is rather serious. Jack, tell me what you know about Ishaq Khan and Miss Williams."

Jack put his cup aside hastily and sat down himself in the chair that had been occupied by Gerald, also he

spread out his paper to act as a shield against his wife's clear eyes.

"For goodness sake," he remarked strenuously, "don't let that foolish brother of mine drag you into this. It is going to be a nasty story before it is finished."

"Yes?" Mrs. Hamilton queried calmly. Things must be bad if gossip had reached Jack's ears, he only heard the most purple patches gathered from men's dinners at the club. "Tell me what it is, please, none the less."

"It has got nothing to do with you," Hamilton remonstrated sternly; "and I shall take jolly good care that it doesn't have, what is more."

"But, Jack," Mrs. Hamilton took the cup held out to her, filled it and handed it back, "I am afraid it must have something to do with us. Gerald loves the girl, you see."

"Damn!" said Jack rather startlingly; he may have dropped some hot tea in the region of his hand. "All the more reason why we should have nothing to do with it."

Mrs. Hamilton accepted his verdict in seeming obedience and sat silent for awhile. "Tell me, Jack," she repeated presently, as if the former discussion had not occurred.

Jack laid down the paper and gazed at her sadly, he had not lived with his wife for twelve years for nothing. "You know what I think of Ishaq Khan," he stated firmly, "he is a native with a very vile European mind. The result is bound to be unpleasant. As for the girl, well, she is white, that is enough to make us sick of the affair to begin with, but she is also young and probably a fool. I am sorry for her in a way."

He ended his harangue and watched his wife carefully. "Yes," assented Mrs. Hamilton again. With one finger she smoothed out the line the next tuck was to take in her work. "I am thinking of asking her to stay with us for a week or two."

"Good Lord, haven't I just said——"

"I know, dear," Mrs. Hamilton looked across with a smile that rarely failed to win the day, "still, there is Gerald."

"But why the—what the—do you want the boy to make a fool of himself and marry this girl, none of us knowing in the very least who or what she is?"

"Not exactly," admitted Mrs. Hamilton; "but we shan't be able to prevent him in any case. He is curiously like you, sometimes, Jack."

The argument was silencing; none the less he made another effort. "What is the girl's aunt doing, Mrs. Bullock, I mean, can't she be spoken to?"

"I wonder?" pondered Marjorie—there was little inclination to put the wonder to the test in her voice. Jack realized perhaps that the argument was finished.

"Have it your own way," he grumbled, ensconcing himself finally behind his paper, "only just remember that I warned you, please."

So it was that Mrs. Hamilton, because of a certain likeness between two pairs of eyes, moved out from her withdrawn sanctum of life and mixed herself in the scandal which was at that moment holding Shillong breathless with interest. What good her efforts did remains to be seen,

CHAPTER II

“Better be silent than thy purpose tell
To others, and enjoin their secrecy.”

FOUR o'clock was chiming slowly and distantly from the church clock next afternoon, just as Mrs. Hamilton, slipping the final button of her glove into place, gathered her skirts round her and walked slowly down the steps of her house to the waiting rickshaw. Joseph, the Hamiltons' elderly and respectable Goanese butler, stood at the foot of the steps, the rickshaw rug carried over his arm, waiting to tuck it round his mistress when she had taken her seat. Mary Ann, the Madras Christian ayah and the only native from whom Mrs. Hamilton would willingly take personal service, followed her down the stairs. She carried Mrs. Hamilton's parasol, handkerchief and book, also she had an eye for Joseph, though her modest face with the saree half drawn across it would scarcely have led you to believe that of her. The four jampannis, looking spick and span in the green and white uniform, two of them in the shafts, two of them at the back of the rickshaw, salaamed respectfully and showed their white teeth in a smile of welcome. The hillman, unlike his brother of the plains, is a cheerful friendly mortal; the mere good-nature of his smile robs it of any hint of impudence.

Mrs. Hamilton settled herself back in the rickshaw,

allowed Joseph to tuck the rug round her, accepted parasol, book and handkerchief from Mary Ann. "Tell the sahib when he comes in," she said to Joseph, speaking in English (Mrs. Hamilton never unless absolutely bound to spoke to the natives in Hindustani), "that I have gone to the club-house this evening, and may be home late. And tell the rickshaw men to take me to Callum Memsahib's house now."

Joseph repeated the order in quick Hindustani to the men, a grin from four mouths answered him. With a little bend forwards, and a unanimous pull and push, the conveyance—which has all the appearance of a lightly made bath chair—was off, jolting rather down the steep path which stood for a drive to the Hamiltons' house, but once on the smoothness of the high road going with a swing and movement good to experience. It was no weight to the four sturdy runners, their brown legs flashed and twinkled with a sound of swift bare feet on the ground.

Mrs. Hamilton lay back, tilting her parasol against the sun. She did not open her book, though it was her usual custom to read when out in the rickshaw ; it lay idle on her lap, and her eyes, though they glanced from side to side, scarce saw anything of the beauties round them. She was as a matter of fact too deep in thought, for she had started on her momentous campaign for Gerald's sake, and was going to see what information could be extracted from the arch enemy, Mrs. Callum. The rickshaw ran on for some way down the principal thoroughfare of Shillong, but presently the runners turned aside from that smooth wide track up a little steep and stony path, corresponding to the Hamiltons'

front drive. The pace slackened to a walk, the front runners strained forward, pulling at the pole. Mrs. Hamilton came out of her reverie with a start and noticed—even though her eyes refused to be pleased with the effect—the wonderful colouring of the pink and blue hydrangeas that lined the grass bank on either side.

Mrs. Callum was at home, so a solemn-faced Mahomedan butler informed her. He held his hand over the wheel of the rickshaw to protect her skirt as she stepped out, then led the way up the wide shallow steps along the verandah. The room into which he ushered her, in contrast to the hydrangeas, bore upon it clearly and undeniably the mark of the East. It was to begin with laden with furniture of a cheap wicker variety, numberless dadoes and gaudily coloured hangings were strewn about, brass figures and bowls shone in splendid profusion. The butler held a marvellous bead chic aside for Mrs. Hamilton to enter, it fell behind her with a continuous tinkling sound and Mrs. Callum, a stout rather brightly coloured woman, rose from a wicker couch to greet her.

"Dear Mrs. Hamilton, how sweet of you," she gushed, holding out a plump moist hand much bedizened with silver bangles.

Mrs. Hamilton accepted the hand, thankful for her gloves, which to a certain extent warded off the moistness, and moved across the room in the wake of her hostess.

"You know Mrs. Chitty, don't you?"

A fragile, washed-out looking woman in flounced white muslin smiled wanly in greeting, and Mrs. Hamilton found herself a chair and sat down. Rather a strained silence held the women once the creaking of Mrs. Callum's

re-sat on couch had subsided. Mrs. Hamilton was aware of the fact that she had interrupted confidences, most probably on the very subject upon which she had come out to gather information. Far be it from her, though, to set the ball a-rolling again. Her eyes strayed from her own white gloved hands' immaculateness to Mrs. Callum's podgy red wrists and the silver bracelets.

Little Mrs. Chitty gathered herself together for an effort. "Mrs. Callum was telling me something so thrilling when you came in," she said; "do go on with it, Mrs. Callum, I am sure Mrs. Hamilton ought to hear."

Mrs. Hamilton lifted mildly interrogative eyes to Mrs. Callum's dusky flush.

"It is not a nice tale," that lady owned, "still as almost boss lady here, perhaps—"

"Yes, do tell me," prompted Mrs. Hamilton sweetly. "I haven't been to the club or heard any scandal for ages."

"This is hardly scandal," Mrs. Callum settled herself a little more firmly amidst loud creaks of protest from the couch, "it is painfully true. I was telling Mrs. Chitty as you came in about a truly trying episode that overtook dear Mabel the other night." She paused heavily.

"Mabel is your eldest, isn't she?" Mrs. Hamilton put in politely.

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Callum, "my eldest. Well, she was staying last week down at the Bullocks'—they were giving a dance, you know, and Mrs. Bullock was so pressing," she hastened to explain, "dear Mabel and Cynthia spent the night there. Imagine Mabel's horror when on preparing for bed after the dance she was

confronted in her bedroom, her bedroom, dear Mrs. Hamilton, by a man!"

Mrs. Callum paused for effect, Mrs. Chitty leant forward with a sigh. "We had got as far as that when you arrived," she remarked in an aside to Mrs. Hamilton. "Do go on, Mrs. Callum, I am too thrilled for words."

"The man was a native," Mrs. Callum proceeded ponderously, "and dear Mabel, even in the midst of her agitation, could note that he wore the uniform of Ishaq Khan. Then he salaamed, handed her a note and vanished. My poor Mabel is hardly able to speak of the affair yet; as it was she took the note from the man, scarce knowing what she was doing, and fainted."

Mrs. Hamilton had since the beginning of the story been struggling with a smile. Dear Mabel and Cynthia, nicknamed by the irreverent Gerald as Ugly and Hideous, she could so clearly picture either of them in this midnight scene. Now, as Mrs. Callum's weighty words drew to a conclusion, Marjorie made an effort with that smile and spoke quickly to mask it.

"Was the note addressed to Mabel?" she asked.

Mrs. Callum and the couch creaked unanimously. "Most certainly not, my Mabel. No, the letter, as the poor child found out when well enough to investigate, was intended for Miss Williams."

The name came out vindictively.

"I always knew she was very very deep, that girl," put in Mrs. Chitty, "I have never trusted her eyes."

Mrs. Hamilton rose to her feet, her love for her brother-in-law was going to draw her into very deep waters, yet she had never been of those to draw back from a venture once started.

"It is a horrid story," she agreed, her voice sounding cooler and sweeter even than usual, "but I can hardly see that it is anything against the girl. We do not know what was in the letter, she most probably is as innocent as—" she paused for a word, "as Mabel. Good-bye, Mrs. Callum, I promised to meet my brother-in-law at the club, so I can't stay for tea. Good-bye, Mrs. Chitty. I suppose you will both of you be coming on to the club later."

The bead chic rattled to let her out, Mahomed Khan showed her pompously down the steps, Mrs. Callum and Mrs. Chitty stared at each other.

"I have never been able to understand Mrs. Hamilton," the last-named lady chirped, "she is so sweet and quiet, yet she sometimes says and thinks the most odd things."

"As innocent as dear Mabel!" Mrs. Callum snorted under her breath. "I expect she had to put a good face on it because of the ridiculous way her brother-in-law is carrying on, but don't ask me to think she really thinks that."

Mrs. Hamilton's rickshaw meanwhile sped down the level white road towards the club. She passed several other swift-running vehicles and called back a heedless good-evening to the greetings she received from the various occupants. Every one knew every one else in Shillong, that is the advantage and at the same time the limitation of a small hill station. The club is a curious rambling building standing in its own gardens. There is a bandstand among its various attractions, and on certain afternoons society gathers in the gardens to listen to the band and imbibe tea and scandal simultaneously. The

club itself boasts of a dancing floor—one of the best in India—on its ground floor, with up above a library, bridge rooms and skating rink. Rinking is the standing amusement in Shillong. Here after the mists have settled down over the tennis courts, and it is too cold and dark for any more playing or scandal talking in the gardens, the beauty and fashion of Shillong transfer themselves, and from 6 till 7.30—when home and dinner loom as superior attractions—they skate round and round to the sound of enlivening waltzes and two-steps. Those who are not proficient at the gentle exercise content themselves by sitting at the small tables arranged round the outskirts and drink coffee, or stronger refreshment, according to their taste.

Gerald Hamilton hobbled across the intervening space on his skates to greet Mrs. Hamilton when she arrived.

"Top-hole seeing you here, Marjorie," he exclaimed.
"Are you going to skate?"

"Not to-night." His sister-in-law's eyes flitted round the room till they found and rested on Miss Williams, who was at the moment floating round gracefully hand-in-hand with Isbaq Khan. "I'll take a table, though, if you can find me one, and later on, if you are skating with her," she nodded her head ever so lightly in the direction of the skating couple, "you can bring her over to talk with me."

Gerald's eyes followed hers; they grew a little stern.

"All right," he agreed, "she is skating the next tune with me, I believe."

He turned and piloted her rather insecurely to a table halfway down the room. Mrs. Hamilton paused now and again in their progress to answer various greetings,

and in the end, as Gerald carefully balanced himself into a seat, a man who had been sitting by himself at a neighbouring table rose and moved across to her.

" May I share your table, Mrs. Hamilton ? " he asked.
" I see you are not skating, neither am I. " .

" Yes, please do," Mrs. Hamilton smiled at him. She rather liked little Dr. Crow, even though she knew him to be none too popular with the rest of Shillong.

The intruder met Gerald's frown blankly, let fall his eyeglass—an affectation for which few of the men could forgive him—pulled up a chair and sat down.

" And where, fair lady, have you been hiding yourself ? " he asked impressively.

" I don't know why I haven't been to the club lately," Mrs. Hamilton admitted, " laziness, I suppose."

" Laziness," Dr. Crow announced, he leant back in his chair and crossed one knee over the other, " which in the case of you, dear lady, is a form of selishness. How dark do you imagine the days are in which we do not see you ? "

" That sounds like a riddle : Where was Moses when the light went out ? Are you going, Gerald ? " For the band, just having had an interval, struck up again with " The Dollar Princess," and Gerald was trying to get to his skated feet with dignity.

" Yes," he answered, " I am skating this with Miss Williams."

" Don't forget to bring her across afterwards," Mrs. Hamilton laid her hand for a second on his sleeve, " I want to ask her something."

Gerald went off, and Marjorie Hamilton turned from watching his well-set-up figure to find Dr. Crow's eyes,

one of them looking large and dignified behind his monocle, fixed on her.

"My dear lady," he commenced gravely, uncrossing his knees and bringing his chair a little nearer hers, "that young brother-in-law of yours, who by the way appears not to like me, is on the verge of making a fool of himself. I wonder if you know that?"

Mrs. Hamilton paused. Gerald, hand-in-hand with Miss Williams, who was looking bewilderingly pretty in some soft dress of golden brown, swung into her range of vision and out again before she answered.

"He certainly wouldn't like you if he heard you at this moment," she said finally; her eyes met Dr. Crow's again.

"None the less what I say is true," affirmed that gentleman. His monocle fell with a click, in reality he could see much better without it. "I am not given to scandal, as you know, but that—er, well, the young lady in question, with whom he is at present skating, has of late been sailing too close to the wind."

"You mean," Mrs. Hamilton leant forward a little, her face flushed, "what people are saying about her and Ishaq Khan?"

Dr. Crow nodded, his little round face looked solemn portentous. "A native, you know," he added.

Mrs. Hamilton shivered ever so slightly; it is to be doubted if Dr. Crow noticed it. "Don't you think," she asked, "that people are a little unkind? And even if they are right," she went on quickly, some hint of dissent had shown on his face, "isn't it all of our duties to do what we can to help the girl? She is so young, she doesn't understand, or know." They were the brother-

in-law's arguments ; Mrs. Hamilton leant back flushed and earnest.

Dr. Crow fixed in his eyeglass, spread out his hands fan-wise on the table, and examined them attentively. "I rather doubt," he began, then broke off his sentence, lifting his eyes to Mrs. Hamilton's troubled face. "The statement is worthy of you, dear lady. I admire it." With that he apparently put the matter from him and talked amiably of the weather and the tennis tournament in progress. As the band flourished to a finish of the waltz, and Gerald could be seen conducting and assisting Miss Williams towards their table, Dr. Crow stood up.

"Good-bye, dear lady," he breathed, all deference, "do not shut yourself away from us again in a hurry ; we need hearts like yours to keep us human in society."

"I wonder what he really thinks of me ?" Mrs. Hamilton thought as she rose to welcome the young couple ; then every other problem fled compared to the one that faced her in Miss Williams' ever-changing, quick-shadowed eyes.

The girl was different from what she had been at first, something lay at the back of her blue eyes, and it was something curiously blended between fear and defiance. "She is afraid of something," was Mrs. Hamilton's first thought, and then, "I wonder why she hates me ?" her second. Apart from her eyes the girl's face had grown thinner, the faint pink of cheeks and lips had faded, she was almost too white, the dark shadows under her eyes and in the little hollows of her temples stood out in too startling a contrast. Mrs. Hamilton's heart, motherly in its very foundations, went out to her almost instinctively.

"I asked Gerald to bring you over to me," she began at once as soon as they were all seated, "I wanted so much to ask you if you would care to come and stay with me next week? The I.C.S. Ball is on Wednesday, you know, and the Bachelors' Ball on Friday. I thought, perhaps, your aunt lives so far out, it would be less tiring for you, and I should love to have you."

"It is very good of you." Just for a second Miss Williams lifted her eyelashes and glanced at Mrs. Hamilton. "If aunt agrees I should like to come very much."

"I am glad," said Mrs. Hamilton simply. The girl is not shy, she thought, just unapproachable, a little on the defensive perhaps. For Gerald's sake she would make another effort. "I am sure you will be able to persuade Mrs. Bullock; she is not keen on dances herself, is she? and I know she must hate to think of the long way you have to come in and out at night. So I think it is really almost settled, and if I don't hear to the contrary I will expect you on Monday."

"Thank you," the girl answered; this time she did not even lift her eyes. She looked up presently at Gerald, though. "Will you help me back, now?" she asked. "I think the next tune is going to start." That was all; but some strange restlessness had wakened in her voice.

Mrs. Hamilton stood up to say good-bye. "Till Monday," she said pleasantly, trying to win a smile.

"Till Monday," the girl answered stiffly, and turned and went, one hand on Gerald's arm to steady the progress.

Mrs. Hamilton took her departure thoughtfully, she did not wait to speak with Gerald, because she could in no sort of way make up her mind what to say; but at the

door she paused to look back at the skaters. The gold brown dress caught her eyes, its wearer swung out for a second from the rest, doing a fine outside edge, the man guiding and holding her hands was Ishaq Khan. Mrs. Hamilton's mouth set a little, there was more than just "for Gerald's sake" behind the battle now. Her brow was frowning as the rickshaw started with a jerk, and swung round the club corner down the road towards home.

CHAPTER III

"In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be, passion spins the plot.
We are betrayed by what is false within."

EVEN so early as 6.30 in the morning Mrs. Bullock fed her fowls. She shuffled round the hen run, attired in the weirdest of costumes, consisting of a faded, none too clean, blue dressing-gown, held together for decency's sake down the portly front by black safety-pins. Her feet, overflowing with fat round the ankles, were encased in a pair of heelless bedroom slippers, and she walked ponderously, partly in an effort to keep the aforesigned shoes from falling off, partly also because her body weighed much and was slow in movement. Arrayed and dressed in all her society clothes, Mrs. Bullock's figure was, to say the least of it, unwieldy, but seen thus in early morning deshabille it was monstrous, repellent to look at.

There were, however, at this hour on this particular morning, no people to see her. From the servants' houses grouped together at the rear of the large white bungalow came the noises of a wordy dispute, but otherwise all round her stretched miles upon miles of low growing green shrubland, the early morning haze, which still clung to it like a veil, unbroken by movement or life of any sort.

Mrs. Bullock clutched her pan of sopped bread and grain to her heaving chest, pushed some obstreperous hen aside with one foot, and moved onwards in her round. Her face, white and flabby, the skin puckering in ridges round her eyes and lying in rolls of fat under her chin, would never have led one to believe that she had once been beautiful. Yet there had been a time, remembered now perhaps only by herself, when she had been as lithe, as softly round and as graceful as her troublesome niece upon whom, even while she appeared to be busy with the hens, her thoughts were centred. The untidy grey wisps of hair, gathered into a scraggy knot at the back of Mrs. Bullock's head, had once shone with the same radiance as that which the sun discovered on Miss Williams' head whenever he rested on it. But that was old history, even Mrs. Bullock hardly alluded to it in these days, and as she jerked the last crumb from the breadpan and proceeded to lift her fat feet wearily up the front steps of the verandah, her mind was altogether fixed on a present-day problem. How was she to persuade her niece to go and stay with Mrs. Hamilton ? Mrs. Bullock realized it would be a case of 'persuasion ; last night she had attempted coercion, shrill abuse and loud declamatory words. They had merely served to thoroughly upset herself for the night, and had left the girl calm and unmoved.

"She is as obstinate as her mother was before her," the stout woman's thoughts panted as she reached the level of the verandah ; "no one could ever move Hilda, once her mind was set."

Her thoughts turned back slowly to that Hilda of her girlhood, the elder sister, who had been so beautiful that even the natives in the road stopped to look at her. Mrs.

Bullock's father and mother had been what is ordinarily described in Bengal as 'County Family,' meaning by that white folk who had come out to India perhaps two generations before and had cut themselves off completely from the Homeland. In India they lived, married and died. Their children were born and brought up, lived, married and died there also. Now and then the white man would take a native wife, more rarely one of the daughters would marry a native or Eurasian, but with inter-marriage or without it they made their homes there, they were in fact County Families. Such a home had been Mrs. Bullock's. She and her sister had been the only children of the first white wife; when their mother died the father married a native, the daughter of one of the families on his tea plantation, and from thence onward the home had rapidly degenerated. Moral sense was almost non-existent in the second Mrs. Nevard, the evil of things she knew much of. Yet Mrs. Bullock, the younger of the two girls, had won through that troublesome time not altogether badly. The level sense of the family rested entirely with her, she had been anxious to improve her position and she had married well. Her husband had been an elderly, respectable, if somewhat sour, Scotch tea-planter. He married the girl for her beauty, and he took her away with him on the understanding that she should have no further intercourse whatever with her family. Mrs. Bullock agreed willingly, the only person she had ever loved had been her sister, and that sister twelve months before had taken things into her own hands and vanished, no one knew where or how. Only Mrs. Bullock had had her suspicions, never voiced even after all these years. Life as Mr. Bullock's wife and on his tea plan-

tation had been hopelessly, irredeemably dull, no children came to the oddly assorted pair, and by degrees the monotony of it ate into a heart that had never been able to rely on itself, and Mrs. Bullock sank slowly and surely back to the level of the Eurasian world she had been so keen to ignore. Her manners, her life, her appearance, all deteriorated, her beauty left her, she grew to be a coarse native woman with a white face. Ten years after their marriage Mr. Bullock died, leaving her sole owner and manager of the tea plantation. There was little to do : the bushes flowered and yielded their crops in due season, Mrs. Bullock sat and watched from her verandah, shuffled round in her dressing-gown, fed her chickens, ate enormously herself. Then one day the English mail brought her a letter. It was two years ago now, but Mrs. Bullock, sitting and resting on a long chair in the verandah before tackling her nicee, could remember the shock it had given her to receive a letter from England. The servants, her confidential allies, had gathered round and watched with bated breath the opening of that momentous epistle. Till her eyes reached the faintly scrawled "Hilda," Mrs. Bullock hardly believed the truth of it; then she had taken a day to consider the contents. At the end of that time she summoned her headman, a tall lank Eurasian who managed the business of the estates for her.

"Mr. Smithson," she said, portentous with gravity, "I am going home to England by the next mail."

Mr. Smithson's mouth, as was but natural, fell open with astonishment. "On business," Mrs. Bullock condescended to explain.

And she had gone : the long journey to England, the

sights and sounds of travel, came too late to give her any enjoyment. She was a harassed, stout, bewildered old lady, excessively untidy, coarse in her speech, dirty in her manners. That was Miss Williams' first impression of her, and it was an impression that never was erased.

Mrs. Bullock had arrived too late to see her sister, her niece Esther received her alone in a dingy, awful room in a back slum of Soho. The mother had been buried the week before ; Esther Williams, for so she said her name was, stood alone in the world, but for Mrs. Bullock, and behind her habitually silent mouth was hidden all the story of her mother's life and death. She never spoke of it. She has no heart in which she can feel things, Mrs. Bullock mournfully decided. None the less she abided loyally by her intentions, and Esther, silent, strange-eyed Esther, accompanied her aunt back to India.

It had cost Mrs. Bullock more than a little discomfort, though the girl hardly realized that, to come forth from her shell of dirty and disreputable home-life and push her way, impervious to sneers and snubs, into the society of Shillong. So much she did for Esther's sake, and the girl's marvellous beauty won her the way which otherwise Mrs. Bullock would never have been able to achieve. And the way once won, here was Esther doing her very best to spoil it all.

Mrs. Bullock rose, heaved a sigh, and made her way down the broad shady verandah. The house, like nearly all tea plantation homesteads, was a single storied, rambling building, designed for coolness in the hot weather, with dark wide rooms, and the aforesaid verandah to keep out as much as possible the glare of the sun. All the doors, there are no windows in these houses, but each

room has five or six doors opening on to the verandah, were hung with green lined chics. Mrs. Bullock paused outside one of these and, raising her voice in a polite effort at friendliness, asked admission.

Esther's cool, level tones responded—the girl had a curiously attractive voice shadowed with some hint of tiredness. She lay high up on the pillows of the bed fronting the door, through which Mrs. Bullock announced herself. The displacement of the chic to admit her aunt's bulky figure let in a flood of sunshine ; it showed her face flushed with sleep, her hair a tumbled mass of gold, spread out on the pillows. Then Mrs. Bullock, having entered, the chic fell back and soft gloom surrounded the room again.

"Ah, you are awake, my dear ; that is good." The old lady wheezed slightly and moved across, sitting on the edge of the bed. Her niece for some strange reason imbued her with a ridiculous sense of shyness. "And you have had your tea and letters ?"

Esther's hand closed on the letter she held, another lay open on her knees—she had been reading it as her aunt entered. "Yes," she answered, and she lifted her eyes and glanced at her aunt, it was as if to say, "Do state your business and begone."

Mrs. Bullock shifted a little under the glance ; she would have preferred it if the girl had liked her a little, she had been so more than ready to love Hilda's child.

"I have come to ask you, my dear," she began nervously, "whether you will not, perhaps, now day is here, reconsider your decision and go for this week to Mrs. Hamilton. She is so important a lady, she can do more for you than I or any one. I do not wish to fight, my

dear ; last night was foolishness. I am an old woman and get quickly angered." Her halting remarks came to a full stop. Miss Williams, who till that moment had been studying a fly's manœuvres on the tea-things by the bed, brought her eyes slowly on to her aunt. Their depths were unreadable, her mouth certainly was not smiling.

" No, we will not fight," she asserted politely. " I have made up my mind to do what you wish, aunt."

Mrs. Bullock felt she was perspiring in unexpected delight; she put up a handkerchief and mopped her brow. But not even in such moments of excitement did she offer to embrace her niece.

" You will go ? Oh, my dear, I am glad," she moved heavily off the bed. " It is for your good I worry, you know that ? " she asked anxiously.

" Yes, I know," the girl answered, something of the reserve that had been with her in speaking to Mrs. Hamilton was evident. " It is very good of you ; I am grateful."

Mrs. Bullock stood looking down at her ; with the little light there was in the room behind her, her unwieldy shape took on a certain dignity, it rang in her voice.

" Gratitude, child ! there is no talk of that between us. I loved your mother."

Then she turned and left her niece to her meditations. They seemed to make the girl uncomfortable. She rose presently, slipping out of bed, a slim, cool, beautiful figure in the plain white nightgown. Her face, now she was alone, looked strained and anxious, fright showed uppermost in the eyes. The two letters she had been reading

lay on the bed in front of her, one a long, fairly closely written sheet, the handwriting boyish, characteristic of the bold signature, Gerald Hamilton, scrawled at the bottom. The other a short note, written on vividly coloured, highly scented paper, a golden crest blinking at her from the corner of the sheet.

Away from him the memory, the thought of the man was repugnant to her, not because he was a native, for Esther Williams had been brought up in too cosmopolitan a world for scruples of that sort to weigh with her. But just because her training had been what it had been, she knew only too well the evil, the unclean creeping evil, that lay within Ishaq Khan. And just because her training had been what it had been, or perhaps because of some flaw in her nature, when she was with him, her senses reeled under his touch, and all that was base and ignoble in her poor, tainted life, rose to do him homage.

She touched his letter now, as if it was some unclean thing, and kneeling by the bed buried her face in the bedclothes, her form shaking with something that was not tears. "Will no one, nothing help me from my own self," she whispered. Almost in answer to her prayers the other letter touched against her out-laid hand, and Esther lifted her head, remembering the path which had seemed that morning to open before her, and the resolution she had just confided to her aunt. Kneeling by her bed she spread out Gerald's letter, and read it for the second time.

"And dear," part of it ran, "it is because I love you so that I know, even though you are far too proud to tell me, that you are in need of help. Won't you let me help you? I won't bother you with what I think or feel, if you

will only just rely on my strength, and power, to help you, and let me know that you are so much trusting in me."

It was a strange letter to have come from Gerald, it is to be doubted whether any of his intimates would have recognized it.

"I will let him help me," Esther decided, "he shall stand beside me, and together we will win through, we must win through."

Then she rose and proceeded to dress for the day. Gerald's letter when dressing was finished she tucked away inside her blouse. She had a feeling that so she donned armour, while it lay against her heart. The other she held to a flame of the candle till it fell in little scented ashes to her feet. The heat had wrought the perfume into something sickening and heavy. Esther was glad to push the chic aside and step out into the clear sun-swept verandah. But even here a faint memory of the scent clung to her, and for some reason it kept fear awake in her heart. Perhaps it was because she knew that even though she stepped into battle with a strong partner at her side, the way to victory would be long and hard, since she was fighting against her own all-powerful nature.

CHAPTER IV

“ Of all strange things in a strange new world,
 Most strange is this :
 Ever my lips must speak and smile
 Without your kiss,
 Ever mine eyes must see, despite
 Those eyes they miss.”

MRS. HAMILTON, standing in front of her long glass, put the finishing touches to her hair and dress before going downstairs to receive her guests. It was the night of the I.C.S. Ball, and she was giving a dinner party in honour of the occasion. Her grey-clad figure, the soft shimmer of the satin blending and mixing with the grey tulle of the tunic, reflected itself pleasantly in the mirror. She formed an altogether charming picture, her husband thought, as he paused in the doorway to see if she was ready on his way downstairs ; but then that was a very customary thought of his.

“ Well, Marjorie,” he asked in passing, “ how does the affair progress ? Your protégée, I mean ; had any trouble since she has been under our roof ? ”

Rather to his surprise, for he was always proverbially and placidly ignorant of troubled waters even when his own bark was afloat on the ocean, his wife turned a worried face to him in answer to his half-laughed question.

"Not troubled exactly, Jack," she admitted, "only I am not a bit happy about things."

"Why not?" Jack asked; he came a little further into the room, since his wife evidently wanted to confide in him. "I don't mind the girl on closer inspection, if Gerald really cares for her; he might do worse, she is surprisingly beautiful."

Mrs. Hamilton turned to the dressing-table, picking up her pocket-handkerchief and spraying some scent on it. Jack, as she knew of old, was a dear dense thing, how was she to describe to him the feeling she had towards Miss Williams? The girl had been three days in the house now, three days that had appeared to Mrs. Hamilton as the most uncomfortable period she had ever lived through. Was she hysterical? Jack would certainly say so, or did the girl really hate her, with a depth of hate very hard to fathom or understand?

"That is a ripping dress, Marjorie," Jack put in at this point; above everything else he liked his wife in grey.

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Hamilton turned to him, putting both hands on his shoulders, meeting his eyes earnestly. "Do tell me honestly, Jack, if you have noticed that Miss Williams doesn't like me?"

Jack knew his wife as perfect, it was her very perfectness that demanded a like standard of virtue from other people, but as a lady had once said to him, "Your wife, Mr. Hamilton, is like an iceberg, one needs a pickaxe to get to know her." Now therefore he blinked his eyes and ventured somewhat uncomfortably—

"It did strike me, Marjorie, that you did not like her."

"Oh," said Mrs. Hamilton, her hands fell away, some-

times Jack saw further and quicker than she would have given him credit for. "But you don't know how I have tried, Jack. Every morning, after you have got up and gone out for your ride, I lie in bed and plan and plan how nice I will be to her, how—"

Jack interrupted, he also bent to kiss her. "Bless your dear heart, wife-of-mine," he laughed, "that is just what is so evident. I have watched those same good intentions shrivel to ashes as the girl looks up at you."

"But why is it?" Mrs. Hamilton asked somewhat mournfully; she slipped a hand on to her husband's arm and together they went slowly down the stairs.

"I don't exactly know," admitted Jack thoughtfully. He paused a second. "Something in you is antagonistic to something in her, I suppose, like cats are to some folk." He held open the drawing-room door for her, then as the sound of rickshaw wheels announced the arrival of some of the guests, he hurried out on to the verandah steps to greet them.

"Like some folks hate cats," Mrs. Hamilton pondered over his remark; "but I don't exactly hate her. I am sorry for her, and ashamed of myself, that's about it," she concluded.

Miss Williams' figure, gowned in pale blue, rose from the sofa near the window to greet her. The girl's face had an added flush of excitement, her eyes were wide and soft, rather appealing in their glance at her hostess. They looked beyond Mrs. Hamilton, however, the next moment, and met Gerald's, who had at that moment been announced. He came in quickly, his tall figure showing to advantage in his mess kit, with sleek brown head and altogether well groomed appearance.

He nodded good-evening to Marjorie, and made straight across the room to Miss Williams ; Mrs. Hamilton turned instinctively to watch their greeting.

"Good-evening, Miss Williams," he said, holding her hand rather longer than was needful, "you have not forgotten all the dances you promised me, have you ?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," the girl answered ; she raised her wonderful eyes and smiled at the boy as he stood in front of her. And the smile transfigured her face, lit it up, showed it younger, more gentle than its customary stiff repose.

"It is no wonder Gerald loves her," thought Mrs. Hamilton with a sigh, "even I should, if she smiled at me like that." Then she turned to receive her other guests who were being ushered in.

Eight of them sat down to dinner, two more subalterns from Gerald's regiment, Dr. Crow and a Miss Thomas—a girl, rather short, rather plump, mouse-coloured hair, very honest brown eyes, an attractive face, not in any sort of way pretty, a ready talker. She was taken into dinner by Mr. Hamilton, and her cheery talk and laughter kept the dinner party going, but once or twice Mrs. Hamilton saw the brown eyes wander to where Gerald sat entirely engrossed with his worship for Miss Williams, and she was sorry for the girl. Miss Williams came out during the dinner party more than Mrs. Hamilton had ever known her do before, she laughed and chattered with the three adoring youths, even her eyes laughed, and Mrs. Hamilton had begun to think they were incapable of doing that. Altogether it was a cheerful, pleasant meal. Afterwards in the hall, as Marjorie waited for her rickshaw, the girls just having been sent off in their's, Gerald,

putting her cloak on for her, seized the opportunity to whisper his thanks.

"You have been a brick, Marjorie; you don't know what this doesn't mean to me."

And that after all was what she was doing it for, his happiness. Mrs. Hamilton felt almost satisfied with her campaign.

As part hostess at these I.C.S. Balls it was Mrs. Hamilton's peaceful, if not very enlivening, duty to sit on the raised dais at the head of the room with a succession of distinguished and elderly lights of the Service. Sometimes she would revolve slowly and gracefully with Judge Boffkins for a round or two. He was an indefatigable dancer, and though his movements were slow and ponderous, and had very little to do with the time of the tune, Mrs. Hamilton never quite had the heart to deny him. That, and one or two dances with her husband and Gerald, generally constituted the evening's exercise for her. She was too big a person officially for the dancing crowd of subalterns and junior civilians to even think of asking her for a dance.

Mrs. Hamilton's inmost heart described these functions as dull, but that was not evident in the smiling attention she bestowed on the heavy officials whom she had to entertain. Jack danced most of the evening, and he liked seeing his wife on the dais, he liked dancing with her still better, only Jack was very hide-bound. His wife had her duties as the wife of the Chief of Police.

Her duty dance with Judge Boffkins had just been completed and she was sitting beside him on the dais fanning herself and endeavouring to infuse an intent expression of interest in some tale he was unfolding,

when her eyes caught sight of Miss Williams' blue dress. Almost mechanically she watched the sway and swing of it, the girl was all music in her dancing, till with a shock of distinct displeasure she recognized who the partner was—Ishaq Khan! Like a flash a conversation she had had with Miss Williams stirred across Mrs. Hamilton's mind.

She had tried to put the case as delicately and unpersonally as possible. Just—"Oh, by the way, Miss Williams, will you think me very interfering if I ask you while you are in my house not to dance with Prince Ishaq Khan. You see my husband does not allow me to, and that makes things a little awkward." The girl had not answered, she had not even flushed, though Mrs. Hamilton herself had grown rather pink during the effort, only she had lifted her eyes and looked straight at her hostess. This perhaps was her answer. The tune came to an end, the couples melted away, Judge Boffkins finished his story and began another. Mrs. Hamilton hardly heard him, her mind was fixed on the next dance and what it would bring forth. It came, and once more the blue dress and Ishaq Khan floated round, faded in and out of the other dancers.

For three dances in succession Mrs. Hamilton sat and watched the undoing of all her plans and hopes. During the fourth, which she happened to have with Dr. Crow, both Miss Williams and the native prince were noticeable by their absence. Dr. Crow, who had spent a busy and happy evening watching and making notes on various scandals, was full of delicate information to impart. As a rule Mrs. Hamilton found him amusing, this evening he noticed she was curiously unappreciative or in-

attentive, he was uncertain which. He would try her, he decided, with a subject which he knew lay close to her heart.

"Dear lady," he opened fire, lying back in his corner of the couch, polishing absent-mindedly his eyeglass, "with reference to that little matter we talked of the other day at the club, have you been noticing things this evening?"

Mrs. Hamilton turned, a little frown hesitating between her eyes. "It is silly of her to dance with him," she admitted, "still—" she paused, undecided in her effort at loyalty.

"Quite so," remarked Dr. Crow; he leant forward, a touch of seriousness on his round, colourless face, "yet if you ask me, it is more than silliness."

Mrs. Hamilton flushed and he saw it, going on quickly: "I mean, dear lady, that if you could see her eyes when she is dancing with the man, you would, I think, say with me that they reminded you of the frightened eyes of a bird that is being mesmerized by a snake—an unpleasant sight. I wonder if you have ever seen it?"

"You mean?" Mrs. Hamilton turned and looked at him.

"I mean," answered Dr. Crow, he lay back again, screwing in his eyeglass, shrugging his shoulders, "just that," he finished vaguely, "it is only an impression, dear lady."

Mrs. Hamilton stood up abruptly, the next dance was beginning.

"But this is our dance too," Dr. Crow put in with pained surprise—it was their invariable practice to have

two in succession, “you are surely not going to desert me ?”

“I must,” Mrs. Hamilton answered ; he noticed that she spoke rather breathlessly, “but don’t you move, Dr. Crow, I see my brother-in-law, he will go with me.”

She had caught Gerald’s attention as he was moving across the room to her. Dr. Crow could know himself dismissed with any one. “Since you command, dear lady,” he bowed, replaced his eyeglass and looked round the room for a fresh victim.

“Gerald,” Mrs. Hamilton explained, as she stepped down from the dais and took his arm, “I have a feeling something is happening ; we must find her.”

His mouth was firm set, his eyes were hard. “I know where they are,” he said, and led the way.

They went through the crowded ballroom, passed the various couples sitting out in the verandahs, out into the silence and dusk of the night. It was one of those heavy scented Indian nights that always strike the European mind with a strange mystery, a mist seemed to lie between them and the sky world. It was not exactly hot, only very airless, and from somewhere far below them came the sound of life, native music borne to them from the huddled bazaar. As always that persistent sound of soft-beaten tom-toms brought a feeling of fear to Mrs. Hamilton, she moved a little closer to Gerald. They walked in silence for some distance into the gloom of the surrounding club gardens. Suddenly Gerald stopped.

“Listen,” he said, and Mrs. Hamilton held her breath. From somewhere quite close came the sound of a woman’s sobbing, a hopeless hushed sound. Mrs. Hamilton could feel the muscles in Gerald’s arm tighten, then he spoke,

" You had better go on alone," he said, " I cannot trust myself."

Mrs. Hamilton nodded, and dropping his arm pushed her way through the low-hanging tree branches into the cleared space beyond. The girl was there, crouched on a seat, her face hidden in her hands, the sobs shaking her slim form. Some distance away stood Ishaq Khan, his face undistinguishable in the dim light, yet Mrs. Hamilton could fancy he was smiling. She went straight over to the seat, and took the shaking form into her arms. The girl's sobs came in little broken words : " I am so frightened," she said over and over again.

Mrs. Hamilton turned to the other watching figure. " Will you go away, please ? " she said, " my husband will speak to you later."

The man moved across the space and stood looking down at them.

" If mademoiselle," he spoke habitually with French mannerisms, " bids me to go, I obey at once. For the rest there is nothing to say, women are always nervous, some little thing has upset Miss Williams."

All the long restrained hatred for the man's race and colour rose in Mrs. Hamilton at the cool insolence of his tone, she would have answered something hotly, but at that moment Miss Williams herself stood up.

" I don't want you to go," she said, and she moved to the man, putting up her hands to his face, " you know how much I need you," she whispered.

The man's dark head stooped to hers, his arms were round her, to Mrs. Hamilton it appeared as if he was going to have the effrontery to kiss the girl ; she rose to her feet quickly.

"How dared you," she said, passionate resentment and scorn sounding in her voice, "you, who are a native, how dared you speak to, or touch a white girl in that way."

The man, it seemed, laughed, but he stood back, pushing the girl's clinging hands from him. "You are right, Mrs. Hamilton," he answered, "I am, as you say, a native; she is of your people—white. Take her then, and hold her, if you can."

With that he turned and disappeared into the night. Miss Williams gave a little startled cry and groped forwards like one gone suddenly blind. She would have fallen, as unconsciousness swept over her, had not Gerald, stepping quickly into the cleared space, caught her in his arms. Across her limp body they stared at each other, and from the far-off bazaar the beaten tom-tom took up its throb of triumph again.

CHAPTER V

And so, the life blood of this rose
Puddled with shameful knowledge flows.
Through leaves, no chaste hand may unclose.

Lot. Rossetti.

K LENNEL McDERMOT might have been described by his friends as a solid-based, trustworthy Scot. Even his enemies could hardly have gone beyond the fact that he was occasionally dour, and when circumstances demanded it, undeniably obstinate. Be that as it may, he was undoubtedly the right man in the right place as Resident of Prince Ishaq Khan's State of Bholpur, being as he was self-contained, self-reliant, immovably honest and loyal. He sat now in the state drawing-room of the Bholpur palace, his sun topee and stick occupying a humble position on the floor beside him, waiting with good-humoured patience for the Prince to grant him an interview.

McDermot had heard that morning, when out for his solitary before breakfast drive, of Ishaq Khan's sudden and unexpected return from Shillong, and though the man's presence was surprising, and—from past experience—probably heralded storms, it was for once in a way not unwelcome. There were one or two affairs that McDermot, as British responsibility for this turbulent State, felt it would be as well to discuss with the hereditary ruler.

The Bholpur State lies not so very many leagues distant from Calcutta. It is a small unimportant domain, very poor for the most part, little cultivated or civilized, covered to a large extent by stretches of untamed jungles. The town of Bholpur—it is really more a village—lies on the outskirts of one of these stretches, a quaint sun-baked spot, the low flat-roofed houses of the bazaar huddling together outside the walls of the Palace. It is a dirty and evil-smelling abode, the bazaar, and inhabited—as McDermot could painfully testify to—by more ruffians than many a much larger town could boast of. Beyond its circle, hardly out of reach of its pestilent smells, the Palace rises, stately, many-faced, white. It is a splendid building set in a wonderful Eastern garden. On the other side of the bazaar, and about five miles' drive from the Palace, lies the English quarter. There are no cantonments or barracks—Government does not deem Bholpur worthy of troops, the native Prince furnishes even the Resident's bodyguard. There are three European officials in Bholpur—the resident, the doctor, and the policeman—but they do not quite sum up the English community, for even in this isolated corner of God's earth, the two great mission forces have established centres. There is a Roman Catholic mission—in McDermot's day it was run and superintended by Father Senart and a handful of native converts—and there was a Scottish mission, under the auspices of a Mr. Lyall and his sister.

The Resident and the doctor lived together, not from custom, but from choice, and for two reasons; one being that Dr. Brown considered his bungalow more healthy for Miss Lyall than the outside shed of the mission school,

and the other being that there was a story attached to the Residency which, in the eyes of Dr. Brown, made it but a gloomy dwelling place for a single man. .

The Resident before McDermot had been a married man, that is to say that he had brought his English bride with him when he took over office at Bholpur. They had spent, it is to be hoped, one ideal month of honeymooning. Miss Lyall, anyway, could testify to the laughter and happiness that had reigned during that time in the Residency ; then, at the beginning of the second month, the girl had sickened, and within one short week lay dead. A large white cross in the centre of the Residency garden bore mute witness to her age and name, for there is no cemetery in Bholpur. That was tragedy enough it would appear, but there was more to follow. The husband, mad with grief, was given a year's leave and sent home to recuperate by a thoughtful Government. At the end of that period, but with a lapse in their thoughtfulness, the Government sent him back to Bholpur. It was the beginning of the hot weather ; the policeman was out on a shoot, the doctor on leave ; only the missionaries were there to watch the second act of the play. For a week he wandered over the house where she had lived, and laughed, and loved, and before his eyes always that white cross stood as memory of how she had died. Then one morning he shot himself, and with very pity for the deed, pushing aside his scruples on the subject of suicides, Lyall buried him in the same grave as his young wife.

Not that McDermot, when he succeeded, would in the least have objected to living on his own in a tragedy-haunted house. That was Dr. Brown's idea. McDermot himself was not the sort of man to be affected by memor-

ies. He was a short, thick-set man, rounding to fatness, with mild red face and blue eyes, the lack of colour, peculiar to Scotchmen, in hair, eyebrows and eyelashes, giving him a falsely characterless expression, till the glance of his eye and the straight cut line of his chin and mouth caught the attention.

The room in which he sat this morning, waiting for the Prince Ishaq Khan, faced on to the wide, beautiful gardens of the Palace. It had been re-decorated and re-furnished by Ishaq Khan's father, when that old gentleman had first been bitten with a craze for Europe. The quaint, early Victorian ornaments, under heavy glass cases, which occupied every available table and corner, were standing witnesses to his visit to England. Naked marble figures of the Greek period stood here and there, looking oddly out of place amongst the tawdry gilt furniture. And, turning from this jumbled warehouse of old furniture to the long windows, the eyes could feast on the splendour of the walled-in-garden—great red heavy flowers, the wonders of the goldmohar, the falling rain of the purple laburnum, the scented white dhatura lilies.

McDermot, however, sat on one of the aforesaid gilt chairs, his back sternly turned to the beauty running wild outside. He had very little use for flaming Eastern flowers, with their exotic scent, and the sight of the Harem wall opposite brought across his mind one of the unpleasant incidents which had to be discussed with the Prince.

He had possessed his soul with silent patience for a full half-hour before the door at the west end of the room was flung open by two very splendidly attired mace bearers,

and Ishaq Khan advanced slowly into the room. He was attired to-day in the flowing white robes of a native chief, and on his sleek black head he wore the heavy turban of his caste, with, flaming in its centre, the great crown jewel of Bhopur. Behind him walked in dignified service an elderly native with flowing white beard, whom McDermot recognized as the head chamberlain, and a man at whose door might be laid most of the mischief of the Palace. McDermot rose to greet his host.

"Good-morning, Prince," he said briskly. "I had word to-day that you had returned unexpectedly, and did myself the honour of calling on you at once."

Ishaq Khan lowered his eyes ; it was hardly a bow, and he moved to seat himself on a cumbersome chesterfield sofa that occupied one corner of the room.

"Yes," he acknowledged. The elder man had moved with him and took up a standing position at the back of the sofa. He was evidently to be a party to the council. McDermot accepted the fact with almost a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"The truth is, Prince," he continued, re-seating himself solidly in his first position, "there are one or two knotty points to be discussed between us. It was providential you should have come back at this moment ; I was meditating wiring for you." He leant a little forward in the chair, his strong, capable hands on his knees, his unwinking eyes on the brown face opposite him. "There has been trouble, uncommon, nasty trouble, in the bazaar this last day or two. Yesterday, I was stoned when I drove through in my dog-cart."

Ishaq Khan's face was immovable. "I have heard," he answered, "and given orders. The offenders are to be

punished." He glanced up at the man behind him, who nodded acquiescence.

"Punished?" Just a shade of impatience sounded in the Scotchman's voice: "That hardly settles the question. This town of yours—and mine—Prince, is a seething hot-bed of sedition. Steps must be taken to stamp it out. Punishment, what is that worth?"

Ishaq Khan smiled, yet the humour of his thought hardly altered his expression. "You make too much of it, McDermot; without doubt it was the mischievous spite of school boys. The matter has been looked into, I can assure you."

Perhaps the red deepened on the Resident's face. As he confided to his friend, the doctor, afterwards, the one thing he really would not stand was being called McDermot by Prince Ishaq Khan. None the less, he apparently dismissed that matter there.

"The other question," he went on, "is essentially private; perhaps you would rather hear it when we are quite alone."

"No!" Ishaq Khan leant back indifferently, and from the midst of his snowy draperies produced a silver cigarette case. "Muzfat is in my full confidence," he concluded, and McDermot having refused a cigarette, he lit one for himself.

"Very well, then. I received private information yesterday," McDermot went bluntly to his task, "that one of the ladies of the Palace lies at this moment seriously ill. Prince, this woman who sent to me in what she considers her deadly peril, is, it would appear, a white lady. I claim the right of at least sending the mission lady doctor to visit her."

Blue eyes met black. For a moment McDermot knew he was looking into hate, undying as eternity. Ishaq Khan's voice when he answered, however, was suave and polite.

"I should have thought, McDermot, that you knew too well the world you move in, to have made such an error. What can I do here? The harem is sacred—as you must know—not through my wish or belief, but through immemorial custom. Do you think the throne of my fathers would be mine for one day after I overstepped all bounds in that matter? Besides, this white woman"—he broke off impatiently—"who brought you the letter?" he asked.

"That I cannot possibly tell you," McDermot stated calmly; "it was brought me in secret." He rose, stooping for his hat and stick. "I think you will re-consider the matter on second thoughts, Prince. I feel within my rights to insist. We are all, I fancy,"—he stood up very straight despite his por'giness,—"British subjects here. I shall come back at 2.30 this afternoon, and I will bring with me Miss Lyall; she is a discreet woman, and clever at medicines."

Ishaq Khan stood up; the cigarette he had been smoking broke in his fingers, and fell; he ground it into blackness with his feet when he moved.

"You are quite right, McDermot." He spoke generously. The Scotchman looked up at him quickly: "You must forgive my seeming brusqueness. By all means fetch the lady doctor here; let her do all she can; pray God she be not too late." His face worked with some passion—was it grief? "This is a sorrow that lies near my heart," he went on. "Indeed, that is why I returned so quickly."

He moved over to the window and stood with his back to the room.

"If that is the case, Prince," McDermot put in bluntly, "I am sorry to have appeared to rush in. However, we will do the best we can, and I have great faith in Miss Lyall." Then he turned, and the gorgeous mace bearers flung open the door, salaaming as he passed.

For some time after he had left, silence reigned in the room. The Prince and the old man were alone, for by a wave of his hand the chamberlain had indicated to the mace bearers to depart. He himself had not moved from behind the sofa, and his eyes never wavered in their scrutiny of his master's back. Ishaq Khan stood facing the flowers. The heavy scent from them beat up against his senses; his hands restlessly worked one within the other; his eyes flamed with wild unseeing rage. Yet it seemed as if he stood thus with his back to his chamberlain until the passion had to a certain extent died out. Perhaps here, his English training came to the front, bidding him control his rage and not make a fool of himself before other people.

"Well." He turned to speak presently, no longer in English, but in the thick soft speech of the native. "How has this happened, Muzfat; who is the traitor in my Palace?"

The old gentleman salaamed gravely, and came out from behind the sofa. "How should I know, my Prince? It comes without doubt from the women's quarter. Have I not often warned you against having aught to do with white women? This one's term of mischief is nearly finished. Praise be to Allah; but oh! my Prince, see that you bring not another in her stead."

Ishaq Khan apparently paid no heed to the lecture ; his eyes looked through and beyond Muzfat.

" The woman dies, then ? " he asked. .

" Even as my Lord has commanded." Muzfat's eyes caught the sharp frown on the face before him. " Even as Allah wills," he corrected himself ; then, with a wily change of tone, " yet, before she dies, there is without doubt time to find out who took the message for her."

" True." Ishaq Khan moved towards a door opposite to the one at which he had first entered, and through which McDermot had taken his departure : " There is still that to find out. I shall see to it, and you, Muzfat, give orders to admit my Resident and his lady doctor when they arrive. Have them conducted with all dignity to the doors of the women's quarters ; from there the woman goes on alone to visit her dead sister." His voice paused on the words ; once again his lips smiled, while Muzfat salaamed, his face unruffled in its calm solemnity.

The door once shut behind him, Ishaq Khan passed quickly down the long stone passage out on to the terrace, across a space of flaming sunshine, till he came to a low door in the wall of the palace. Here he knocked twice, and on its being opened to him stooped his head to enter. An immense black man bowed his head in greeting. He was the head eunuch, the keeper of the women's gate, and Ishaq Khan stood now within the harem itself. It was an attractive place to look at, paved with marble ; a deep tank of vivid blue, in which a fountain played, stood, in the centre ; wide, shallow steps led down to its coolness ; big palms in pots stood at the four corners, and all round the square ran the trellised verandahs of the ladies quarters, little steps leading down from them on to

the marble square. At one of these front doors a group of women had been sitting, running the jessamine flowers and rosebuds into long wreaths, the soft murmur of their voices, the tinkle of bracelets on hands and feet, blending pleasantly with the patter of the fountain water. At the opening of the wall gate, however, the group rose hastily to their feet, and with little suppressed screams and giggles fled in all directions—it is not seemly to be seen thus altogether, not even by the Lord of the Harem. Their flowers and half made wreaths lay where they had dropped them. Ishaq Khan stepped over them on his way into the verandahs. He went straight forward, not stopping to look into any of the rooms, though all the doors stood wide, until he reached a room on the further side. Unlike the others, it was not open to the day; a heavy green chinc hung before it, and in front of that crouched a ragged dirty woman of the sweeper caste—the only caste in India that will have anything to do with death, and the final offices to the dead. She shuffled aside as Ishaq Khan paused, murmuring something to the effect that Death was a lover who brooked no rivals, but she made no motion towards stopping his entry. He was in time then, he concluded, for had the occupant of the room already breathed her last, it would have been this old hag's duty to prevent any one from entering the death-tainted atmosphere. The task that lay before him was scarcely to his liking, but with a shrug of his shoulders Ishaq Khan pushed aside the chinc and entered.

The small room was almost completely wrapped in gloom, the door, its only means of light and air, being guarded by the chinc. Here and there, through the green folds, however, very faint rays of light managed to pierce

the darkness, enough to show Ishaq Khan that the woman lay on a piled-up bed in the corner, her head high among the pillows, her breath coming in short, broken gasps. As the chic fell behind him again she lifted herself almost into a sitting position in the bed, and her voice came in something like a sharp sound of fear.

Ishaq Khan moved over to her softly, and, sitting himself on the edge of the bed, took one of the restless hands into his. With eyes growing accustomed to the gloom, he could note the lines of death marked on the white face that lay back among the pillows.

"Why, Minnie,"—the man's voice speaking the English words was full of a drugged sweetness,—“you have been ill, my little white rose, and I not to know. The moment I heard I hurried to your side, and Allah has answered my prayer—it is not too late. You will get well now.”

The woman lay watching him; only her breath rattled and shook in her throat, as it fighting its way backwards and forwards. The hand he had taken lay passive under his carefully moving fingers.

“My beautiful English Rose,” Ishaq Khan went on, “you must not leave me; I need you. Need your pure white skin, the gold of your hair, the sky blueness of your eyes. See; I will give you back life; feel how the blood pounds to your heart at my touch.” He lifted her hand, setting his lips to the place where the pulse throbbed in the thin wrist.

Still the woman watched. “What is it you want?” she asked at last. It was as if the words were torn from her. “You have had all I had to give long ago. What is there that I have left that you want to take from me?”

" You want to please me, as ever, is that not so ? " he answered, disregarding the bitterness that lay behind her words. " Then tell me the name of the person who took that letter for you to the Residency."

The hand in his fluttered ; the woman's voice was hardly audible. " You know ? " she whispered.

" Yes, I know,"—Ishaq Khan spoke quickly,—“ but I am not angry, little white rose. The English doctor comes to-day, by my request, to see you. I would reward the one who so bravely helped you in my absence, and you will tell me the name, will you not ? ”

The woman looked up at him. His face was very near hers as he leant over her ; her eyes were hungry, her mouth a little twisted. " Oh ! the black heart of you," she whispered—her words hardly reached his ear—" and, yet "—her voice gathered strength, " bend down to me," she said, " take me into your arms, kiss me as you have not kissed me for many months, my King, then I will tell you."

To gain his ends Ishaq Khan would go far and stop at naught. He gathered the woman, even as she had desired, into his arms, and, stooping in the darkness, pressed his mouth to hers. Yet even in that second of seeming victory he knew that he had lost, for the body in his arms shook with one convulsive movement and then lay still, a dead weight. The woman's face, as his own drew away from it, fell back on the pillows, the eyes even then glazing, a thin small trickle of blood oozing from the mouth.

She had died as he kissed her. Ishaq Khan rose with a loud shouted oath, because for the time being wild primaevial fear was surging in his heart, and he flung the

body from him so that it fell and lay, its white, piteous face to the wall.

The crouching figure outside had heard the oath and movement. She stood now in the doorway, the chic upheld, so that the sun shone through the door on to the silent bed.

"Ah weh ! Ah weh !" she chanted, lifting her voice in the customary death wail. "The slayer has been here; the dead lie at his feet. Ah weh ! Ah weh !"

There was a subdued stir along the terraces. The other women would gather presently, to sit on their haunches outside the door and wail the death chant, while the old woman prepared the body for the grave. Ishaq Khan strode out into the square; fear had left him, but he was excessively annoyed.

"See to it," he commanded the eunuch, "that that carrion worm touch not the body, but to lay it straight and orderly until after the doctor men shall have visited." Then he went with swift and angry steps, and the women's court settled itself down to the interesting and exciting festival of wailing for the dead.

When timid little Miss Lyall, conscious of her fear, yet brave in her determination, was led into the place of mourning an hour or two after, all was in order. The chic had been rolled up, the bed pulled into the centre of the room. Upon it, looking very calm and stately in her death sleep, lay the body of what had once been known as Minnie Brown. Bravely dressed in native bride's finery, the gold hair in the customary heavy plaits either side of the white face, the blue eyes closed and sealed; for if a corpse looks at you with open eyes, you are bound to follow in its footsteps ere the year be out.

The mourning had finished ; the courtyard and terraces were deserted ; only the old hag, nodding after her labours, crouched at the corpse's feet, while just outside in the sunshine, Abdul, the eunuch, kept heavy guard. Miss Lyall, as she stood by the gaudily-dressed figure on the bed, was conscious of fear and disturbing mystery. What did it all mean, and what other tragedies lay hidden behind those silent walls, within that sun-flecked court ? Not a sign, not a sound of life ; yet she knew that all around her carefully hidden eyes must be watching. Then the sight of that white face moved her to something else and she dropped on her knees by the bed in a flood of tears.

" Oh, you poor thing, you poor thing," she sobbed ; " how did it happen ; what cruel fate threw you here to die ; why didn't I get to know you sooner ? "

Minnie Brown, had she been alive, might have smiled at the thought of Miss Lyall " knowing the likes of her " ; as it was, she stayed very silent, hiding behind her closed eyes the secrets and tortures of a life she had been so more than glad to leave.

Miss Lyall went back presently, shaken, and with red eyes, to Mr. McDermot who, with his usual solid patience, was waiting for her outside the harem wall.

" Well ? " he said, as she came through the door ; but he had had his answer in her face before she spoke.

" She is dead," Miss Lyall whispered. She had to speak in a whisper ; the mystery of the place was still clinging to her.

" I thought she would be," he nodded.

" Have you anything else to tell me ? " he asked, but

that was not till after he had assisted her into the dog-cart and they had started on their way home.

Miss Lyall turned to him, her rather pathetic bundle of tracts which she had taken with her to console the dying, strained to her thin figure, her eyes wide on his face. "Oh, Mr. McDermot, she was white, as white as you and I are, and her poor face, her poor body, so decked in heathen clothes. What does it mean ; how can it have happened ? "

"I don't know, my dear lady,"—McDermot put a reassuring hand on hers, "and I don't suppose we ever shall know. Poor woman, she sold her body into bondage, without a doubt, but since she is dead, we must let her rest in peace. It is not a matter that the Government would care to fight over."

And that last remark he made, despite the fact that the woman in the letter which she had sent him had said : "Save me, for they are poisoning me to death slowly." McDermot had not been Resident of Bholpur for four years, without having learnt the wisdom of when and where to hold his tongue.

CHAPTER VI

(We called her the woman who didn't care)

But the fool he called her his lady fair :
Even as you and I.

Rudyard Kipling.

AND while Minnie Brown and her fate were occupying the minds of the people in Bholpur, life moved forward in Shillong.

Ishaq Khan had vanished for the time being, back, it was to be presumed, to his own native underworld. Jack Hamilton for one was truly grateful for the fact, as he confided to his wife the day after the I.C.S. Ball—it would have been very inconvenient to have had to fight with the man publicly. Such a course would have been neither diplomatic, nor in accordance with the tenets of the Government. Miss Williams, as soon as she was well enough to move, returned to Mrs. Bullock and the calm solitudes of the tea plantations. She was quiet and subdued outwardly, for a week's fever—and her temperature had run very high—had sapped the strength from her, but inwardly she was ful' of a wild seething resentment at what she considered the interference of Mrs. Hamilton. Did she love Prince Ishaq Khan, or was it merely an insatiable desire for excitement, for sensations ? She only knew that the whole of her body and soul ached with something that amounted to almost physical anguish for the sound of his voice, the cool touch

of his hands about her. It had been the same force, purposeless and unreasoning, that had driven her mother so far and so hopelessly down into the dregs of life, leaving her at the last, spent and broken, to die in the gutter. To that memory, for the time being, Esther shut her eyes, and she stood with her back to the wall, very much as some wild animal might, fighting out the battle of fright and desire in her own heart, and hating passionately the hands held out to help her, the kindly curious eyes.

Mrs. Bullock apparently remained oblivious of the storm which had swept so near ; at least, she said nothing of past events to the girl. She had never understood, or attempted to understand, Esther ; she only realized that the girl was perilously like her mother, and Mrs. Bullock's one earnest desire was to get her safely and securely married. For that end she would frequently don her best purple velvet, a peculiarly unbecoming and heating costume, and wait on the verandah to waylay young Hamilton when he called, as he very often did, to take Miss Williams for a ride, or a walk, or to escort her to the club.

"Oh, my, Mr. Hamilton," she would breathe, her greeting very rarely varied, holding his hand in a moist embrace, "it is good of you to take such trouble for just a sulky girl. But you pay no attention to her little ways, eh ? I know her ; I was myself like that as a girl."

Gerald would release his hand as soon as possible, and smile vaguely. He was dimly aware of resenting the fact that this coarse, purple clad figure should imagine she had ever been in the least like Esther. She was certainly, if he stopped to think of it, not a reassuring model

for the girl to be built on. But he did not stop to think, nor would he. Mrs. Hamilton herself was slowly being driven to realize that fact.

She talked it over with him one day, about a month after Miss Williams had returned to the tea plantation. They were sitting, as on the day when the subject had first been opened between them, either side of the fire in the Hamiltons' drawing-room. Jack had withdrawn to his study as soon as he observed which way the conversation was going to turn. He had already tackled his young brother on the subject, to be met with a resistance which he was quick to realize was undefeatable. Still, he would let Marjorie make her effort, and Mrs. Hamilton made it. She talked gently and seriously to the boy. She told him of her baby, of Bob, of the plans and hopes that had been laid aside with him in that desolate jungle grave.

"You are so like him, Gerald," she ended, kneeling in front of the fire to stir it to a keener blaze. "He would have been the same as you if he had grown up. That is why—— Oh, Gerald,"—she turned to him putting her hands on his knees,— "I cannot bear that you should spoil your life in any way. And this girl—— No, Gerald," as the man moved restlessly, "honestly, I am not going to say anything against her, only, she isn't, really she isn't, the girl you ought to marry. Women see further than men perhaps in these matters. I know—as well as I know my own heart—that she does not love you, never will love you, not even if she marries you—and then, least of all."

Gerald put her hands aside rather stiffly and stood up. "It is no use, Marjorie," he said. His voice

sounded blunt, because he hated to hurt her. "I have argued the matter over with Jack before this. If the two of you—old dears as you are—came to me to-morrow and said she was a leper, or any other loathsome thing you could imagine, I should still marry her. And I will make her love me; I know I can." He moved a little impatiently into the middle of the room, and stood looking down at his sister-in-law where she knelt, eyes back on the fire. "Do you think," he continued, "that I don't see, don't understand what you are frightened of. Love has not made me quite blind. Often, when I have been with her, I have felt her shrink from me, known she almost hated me, because from somewhere near, a native has spoken, or down in the bazaar those damned tom-toms have elected to start playing. But do you think my love is weaker than his hellish influence, whatever it is, can be? I shall win her, I know, and I shall take her home for a bit before we settle down out here, and she shall learn to forget." His voice almost rang with triumph. "I will ask her again this evening, Marjorie," he went on, coming back to the fire, dropping into the chair beside her, "and if I win—I have a sort of feeling that I shall to-day—I will bring her back here with me. And you, Marjorie, you will be good to her, make her feel that we are all going to stand by her. She minds what you think of her ever so much."

"Does she?" Mrs. Hamilton doubted, but she turned and put her hands in his. "Of course, dear, we will be nice to her, only I wish—"

"No, don't wish that," he interrupted hastily. He stood up again, drawing, her to her feet at the same time. "It is almost heresy to me." Then he pressed

her hands and left her, but whether her heart was content with the result of her conversation is open to doubt.

Mrs. Bullock, by some curious accident, was absent from her post of welcome as Gerald dismounted from his pony at the foot of the bungalow steps. Instead, Esther herself came listlessly down to greet him. She was dressed in soft yellow muslin, bordered at hem and waist with deep brown, the colour and softness of the flimsy material showing up to perfection the very gold of her hair, the sun-flecked light of her eyes. Gerald quite honestly thought he had never seen anything so lovely, and the knowledge made him hopelessly limited in conversation.

" You are not going to ride then, to-day ? " was all he said.

" No," she answered. Her hand stayed in his, her wide eyes held his brown ones. " I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind. I am tired. I will go in my rickshaw, if it is not too dull for you walking beside me."

" Dull for me ! " Surely her eyes had held some message for his heart : " That would be the last word I should use to describe it. We will go clubwards, shall we ? The sais can take my beast straight up there, if that is what you would like ? "

" Yes,"—the girl agreed carelessly ; " and when we get on the level I will walk a little."

She went back into the house to get her hat, while Gerald issued directions to the sais about the pony. They may have been a little muddled ; his heart was pounding furiously in his throat, it seemed to him it was rather hard to talk at all. He could have sung his orders better, only very likely people would look upon that as

a sure sign of madness. But was not the long siege nearly over, had not the girl's eyes held out the flag of surrender that moment, as she had stood above him on the steps ?

On their way to the club, Gerald, with his usual blissful disregard of the rickshaw runners, put his hand over Esther's as it lay on the arm of the rickshaw. To Gerald a native was a native, much as a dog was a dog ; he paid just as much attention to their presence.

" You don't mind ? " he asked Esther, hope flaming anew in his heart, since she left her hand there, soft and quiescent to his touch.

The girl smiled at him, shaking her head. That was the tragedy of it ; she did not mind. His hand, so touching hers, the heat of his blood near her own, meant nothing, absolutely nothing to her.

To Gerald, however, it meant a lot. He walked on air ; speech was unnecessary, luckily, because he could not talk. They arrived at the level plateau before the club just as dark was beginning to fall. Tennis enthusiasts, rackets slung over their shoulders, discussing heatedly the merits and demerits of the afternoon's play, were thronging down from the upper courts. From below, in the tea gardens, the regimental band was striking up " God Save the King " as a finish to the afternoon's performance. All society was wending its way clubwards.

Gerald helped the girl from her rickshaw. " Don't let us go in there," he pleaded, nodding his head in the direction of the rink, " it is so crowded. Besides, you said you wanted a bit of a walk ; let us go over to the

sister-in-law's. I half said I would bring you to-day. She will give us tea, and your rickshaw can meet us there. They can go the long road round, while we cut through the gardens."

"Mrs. Hamilton"—Esther paused on the word, the faintest flicker of annoyance passed over her mind. For some reason or other she had never liked Mrs. Hamilton, and sometimes she hated her. "I don't suppose she wants to see me."

"Yes, but she does," Gerald argued; "do come, Esther." He had not before called her by her name; his voice dropped on it as if he spoke of something holy.

The girl smiled again. "Very well," she agreed finally, "since you wish it."

For the greater part of the way they walked in silence, her figure swaying, so it seemed to him, beside him. He had always loved her walk. The gardens were practically deserted—here and there an ayah, gathering her charges together with shrill words, passed them hurrying prams and go-carts home. The hill evening mist is not good for the babalog, any self-respecting ayah will tell you. It was through these gardens, if a little more off the beaten track, that Gerald had led Marjorie the night they had taken the girl from Ishaq Khan. Was Esther thinking of that, he wondered; and suddenly his hand closed on hers again and held it fast. They were alone now; there was nobody awake enough in the gardens to watch them.

"You do mean this as an encouragement, don't you?" Gerald asked presently. "Oh, Esther, it means, doesn't it, that you are going to give me the right to love you, at last."

The girl stopped in her walk, and he turned to her, gathering her very tenderly into his arms.

"I don't know," she whispered, and for the moment her hat shaded her face completely.

"But I am taking the courage to know for you," he answered, and he put his hand under her chin, tilting her face up to his so that he could kiss it.

A woman's heart is often won by a kiss, taken and given like this in the strange hush of twilight, with only the silent stars and sleepy earth to watch the meeting.

"You would not let me kiss you, dear love"—Gerald's voice shook a little—"if you did not mean to take my love, would you?"

"I don't know," the girl answered again. "It meant nothing to me," she added dully, but it is to be doubted whether Gerald heard. What man would have, under the circumstances?

"If any man had wanted to kiss me as badly as you did just then"—Esther struggled with the truth a little later; they were almost at the Hamiltons' house by that time—"I should have let him, you know. That is the way I am made."

"Then we are quite safe, dear," the boy laughed—he was splendidly blind to the truth of her remark—"because no one else will ever want to as badly as I do, and you shall keep your kisses for the one who wants them most."

And even then he did not realize that she had not kissed him; there is always one who holds the cheek.

Mrs. Hamilton, standing up to greet them as Gerald ushered Esther in, knew that her worst fears had been realized. Then Gerald spoke.

"Marjorie," he broke into speech quickly, "it has all worked out right. I have made Esther see things from my point of view at last; she is going to marry me."

It was Mrs. Hamilton's chance, and she missed it. Words would not come, she could only stare, and it is to be feared that her eyes told only too plainly the horror with which she regarded this event. Esther's face grew a little white, and she pushed past Gerald into the room.

"Ah, I see," she said, "you have always felt like this to me, cold hate behind your kindness. I am not good enough for him, you think, and it is true. This much do me the credit to believe." She was growing a little hysterical. Gerald put out his hand to try and stop her, but she pushed it away. "I have fought against his will in this matter. I have spoken to him always the truth. To-night I will tell him again, and before you." She turned splendidly to Gerald. "Mr. Hamilton, I do not love you. I have told you that often enough. There is worse still—I love a native. Ask Mrs. Hamilton what that means to your people. If he needed me, or called me, I would follow across any barrier, but, but—" Suddenly her voice choked on the words, her figure swayed, she lifted her hands to her face and broke into a passion of tears.

Gerald never hesitated. Fate was against the little prayer that went up from Mrs. Hamilton's heart, that surely now he would see how hopeless his idea was. Instead, he just put out his arms and drew the weeping figure to him, so that the sobs hushed themselves against his heart.

"Dear," he whispered, and across the bent head his

eyes met his sister-in-law's, and for the moment they were stern with anger.

Mrs. Hamilton stole out and left them. For some unexplainable reason she felt ashamed of herself.

"I am sorry, Gerald," she whispered as she passed, but he did not appear to hear her.

CHAPTER VII

Take up the white man's burden
And reap his old reward,
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard.

R. Kipling.

SEDITION, as McDermot had very truly stated to the prince in their interview, ran rampant through the State of Bholpur. It was whispered in the streets, taught in the native schools, shouted aloud at mass meetings by the young hot-heads of the town Down with the British Raj, death to the English usurper and tyrant, freedom and power for the Bengali. It was a curiously muddled jargon talked at these meetings : death, martyrdom, assassination, murder, all mixed together in a rapid flow of talk. Whom would they not kill, what not suffer themselves, to hurl the heel of the oppressor from off the neck of their holy mother India, and crush his carcase to death on her altar ?

Just such a meeting, wild with hurled abuse, mad with passion run riot, was being held in the wide central hall of the prince's palace, a month after Ishaq Khan's sudden return from Shillong. He himself was in the chair at the head of the long table, for the meeting was being run on well-learned English lines. The other members crowded round, some sitting, some standing, all their faces marked with the same feeling, the air

heavy with their wild uttered oaths and threats. A man, hardly more than a boy, at the opposite end of the table to Ishaq Khan, was just concluding a speech. He spoke well, even despite his tense excitement.

"I have been to the land that they call home, brothers, and I know," he raved to the upturned heated faces, "they are rotten at the backbone, these oppressors of ours, there is no soundness in their hearts. London, their great city, is a home crawling with misery, vice and dirt. I have had white people whine to me for money in their streets—the same white people who out here insult and overlord us, who are too holy to sit in the same rooms with us, whose homes and clubs we are not allowed to pollute with our presence. I tell you——"

Ishaq Khan leant forward in his chair, his clear voice cutting coldly through the charged feeling of the room.

"This is all outside the mark, Ra Chandra," he interrupted; "it is very good, and without doubt there is truth in it. But let us keep our discussions to deeds, not mere ravings against insults. Let us act, not talk."

"Aye, aye—act, act," the meeting broke into unanimous shouts. "That is what we would have; who will lead us that we may strike the blow?"

Ishaq Khan, leaning back in his chair, watched and listened to the tumult he had evoked with an expression of wearied contempt. They bored him so, these hot and wordy agitators. Not one among them was capable of aught but words; hatred was there, but it was the shrill venom-tipped hatred of women, that contents itself with sneers and abuse, not the steady hot hate of man that kills and rests at killing. And yet these were the only people to whom he could look for support, to

whom he could apply for help in the working out of the hate which ate into his heart against the white man, a hate which had started first in the days of childhood when he, Ishaq Khan, had known what it was to be despised and mocked at for being a native boy at the big English public school to which he had been sent.

And this same hate, hidden then, had grown as the boy grew, with more and more resentment for its foundation as the child became man and still his colour lay as a slur upon him. But despite his hate, Ishaq Khan was not fool enough, or blind enough, not to realize the true state of things around him. India, and Bhopur in particular, bubbled with seditious talk ; the papers at home in England discussed the question once a week ; even the Mother of Parliaments deigned to cast an eye on the progress of events, and wise heads in the Home and Viceregal Government bothered their minds with the matter. But there was no one who knew quite so well as hate-bound Ishaq Khan how much this bubble of sedition stood for. It meant—nothing : his tired angry eyes looking round at the heated faces owned to that. The mass of the population of India had heard of it only as a mad tale ; even in Calcutta, its headquarters, the working and planning of it lay in the hands of a few wild, educated—Heaven save the mark—Bengali Babus, a race of hot talkers but white-livered to the backbone. Here and there a bomb thrown at the wrong carriage by mistake, now and again a vague formless plan to shoot some official dignitary that failed for some such futile reason as the pistol being too old to fire, or the aim too hopelessly unsteady. And myriads upon myriads of abusive threatening letters and pam-

phlets, for the Babu, as his name implies, is never so happy as when writing. Here lay the fruits of this much talked-of seditious movement; Ishaq Khan could weigh only too well the value of them.

He held up his hand presently for silence from the meeting and stood up to address them. A stately enough figure, the brown impassive face lit by such hate-burned eyes.

"There is too much talk at these meetings," he began slowly, "and talking leads us nowhere. Also it is foolishness, and a poor form of foolishness, to throw stones at the Resident's dogcart. I hear it has been done again. We are not schoolboys, my brothers," his words rang rather scornful, "our work lies deeper than that. Are we to voice our hate with stones? When the time comes for throwing let us see that we use something," his voice dropped a little, "that kills." His eyes swept round the table. "But the time has not yet come," he went on, and it seemed as if his own words waked some fire in his heart, that pushed aside the indifference, "and till it does, let us lie quiet and unnoticed. Remember, that the door which waits a friend swings open to the day, and that it is easier to enter an open door than one which has been closed by suspicion or fear. A little longer, brothers, we must eat the bread of deceit, bow our head in feigned obedience, but, when the time comes," of a sudden the whole face was alive with some passionate, deep, stirring force, "we will move surely. The ground shall run with blood, it will splash against our doorsteps and run in our streets. Blood, blood, which runs the same colour from those cursed white bodies as from ours."

The fire passed, he dropped back in his chair, a rather bored man of the world. "So, remember," he ended carelessly, "our watchword for the present is—peace!"

The meeting broke up without much further discussion, only Ra Chandra lingered after the others had gone with some evident desire to argue things with his leader. His was the face of a fanatic; one comes across them in all races and in all ranks. It is fanatics, religious, moral, military, and socialistic, who are at the bottom of all the trouble in the world. Fate gives them one splendid all-engrossing theme to work out, too big, alas! for earthly bodies, and in the end it drives them mad. And madness lies at the other end of the scale to genius, even though they touch so nearly on each other.

Such a man was Ra Chandra, tall, thin, emaciated, with excitable features, and weak, thin-lipped mouth. Yet there was some fineness in his face that Ishaq Khan, larger, stronger made man, lacked altogether.

"It is I, Maharaja," Ra Chandra stated as the last member took his departure, "who instituted the throwing of stones in the bazaar. I do not, I must own it, for here we are all free equals, quite agree with your conclusion, re the door. I would not sneak in as a friend, my hand is against all English folk, and whenever they meet me they know it."

"Yes," agreed Ishaq Khan. He waved his companion to a chair, sometimes it amused him to argue with this wild dreamer. "Not only do they know it, friend, they also act upon the knowledge. You, my poor Ra Chandra, are a suspect, I suppose, in the eyes of our busy and important police?"

"I say it with joy." Ra Chandra leant back in his

assigned chair, his eyes shining with pride. "Twice during this month have I been put to the indignity of having my house searched, and each time have they found incriminating papers, and once a firearm with which I was in the habit of practising revolver shots in my backyard."

"Just so, and to what end all this?" Ishaq Khan's voice rang scornful, "they look upon you, these level-headed, calm Englishmen, as a child, a harmless babbler. They see as well as I do," there was some bitterness in the words, "that it is not men like you who are a menace to their rule, you, with your revolver practice, your incriminating papers and all your heroics. And they leave you alone, much as they would leave a mosquito alone when searching for a snake."

"That is not true," Ra Chandra interrupted fiercely, "they fear me, and with reason."

"So," Ishaq Khan dropped his eyes, flicking an imaginary speck of dust off his sleeve, "their fear then drives them to ignore you, else how is it you are still at liberty?"

"That is sometimes a disappointment to me," admitted Ra Chandra. "I would suffer for the cause. Still it is a sign of weakness in that they are so lenient; they shut their eyes hoping to win us with peace; one of these days I will arise and go forth to kill, and some of them, at least, will learn too late the earnestness of my hate."

He stood up. Ishaq Khan watched his figure with quizzical eyes. If this mad fanatic had chosen such a course for himself, why should not Ishaq Khan use him for his own ends. There was one small insult, above all

others, he would like to pay back to the white folk, the insult which had rung in Mrs. Hamilton's voice when she had called to him: "How dared you, you who are a native!"

"There is after all a certain amount of sense in you, Chandra," he said softly. The other man turned to him eagerly. "It is pioneers like you who will lead the path to our victory. But when you get nearer killing, see that you choose the right people. There are many officials here whose death will not even reach to the ears of the people in England. Such a one is McDermot. You must fly higher. A man like Hamilton now, the next Lieutenant-Governor, so gossip has it, and a man with an iron hand on our rights."

"What you say is true, Maharaja. I had thought even of the Viceroy," Ra Chandra drew himself up, his thin lips tightened; "but I will think of what you have said. I would give more than my life for the cause."

"And I," said Ishaq Khan.

After the other man had gone he sat on at the table, his eyes gloomy with his thoughts. What should his next move be? Should he go back to Shillong and resume his easy conquest over the white girl there? —it was a way of hurting the pride of the English which appealed to him very much—or should he stay on at Bholpur and stir up, govern and direct this all-important seditious movement? Here he had such feeble, useless tools to work with, and there—well, there passion and desire for the girl herself and the wonderful white and gold beauty of her weighed somewhat in the balance with the idea of insulting his enemies.

He was still undecided in his mind when he made his

way later in the evening to the English dining-room, an apartment which adjoined the state hall. He had changed into European evening dress, for following his invariable custom Ishaq Khan was giving a Saturday dinner party to the English contingent of Bholpur. It was a custom started in the days of his father, a dinner party on Saturday, a shoot on Sunday. Usually every one foregathered to his invitation, and he had grown accustomed to taking Miss Lyall into dinner and listening with a polite attention which never wearied to her shyly uttered platitudes. But since her visit to the harem, Miss Lyall had refused these weekly functions. She worded a little note each time to the effect that she regretted she was unable to accept. Ishaq Khan was a little grimly amused at her stubbornness.

The doctor and McDermot were late in arriving this evening, and a very desultory conversation was in progress between the Prince and the two priests when they were announced. Lyall, a tall lanky Scotchman, with reddish hair and a mournful face, had been and still was visibly perturbed at his sister's persistent absence from these gatherings. He had already apologized three times and with three different reasons for her, while the Roman Catholic father, a strangely and habitually unconversational man, known to the natives because of his black robe and shuffling walk as the Black Beetle, sat in silence and nodded his head at stated intervals.

The dinner party progressed much more cheerfully once the other two men had arrived. Dr. Brown had plenty to say and said it to some effect. There was a fear of cholera in the bazaar, he wished to interest the

Prince on the question of drains, which he succeeded in doing, until the third course had been handed round. Then rather a weighty silence fell, which McDermot broke by an abrupt proposition. So far he had spoken very little, and he had made countless bread pills with his strong fingers, a sure sign that something was puzzling his brain.

" You won't be going back to Shillong for a month or two, will you, Prince ? Now I have got you here there are so many things I am anxious you should look into," he said.

" I had scarce made up my mind," Ishaq Khan paused, his eyes met the Resident's for a moment ; " you see I left suddenly, the season is still in full swing. Bholpur is not amusing."

" Faith it is not," agreed the doctor ; " here have I, McDermot, Lyall, and the policewallah—who is away on leave at the present, lucky devil—been playing a foursome of tennis every afternoon of our lives for the past three months. No one to watch us even, since Miss Lyall has discovered that it is a waste of time."

" No, it is not likely," assented McDermot, " but on the other hand it is work, Prince, ours and—well, yours. Besides," another little bread pill formed and was flicked aside, " the season that you speak of is almost over, as a matter of fact. I had a letter from the Hamiltons to-day, Government moves back to headquarters next week, every one will be on the move."

" So soon ? " Ishaq Khan helped himself to port and passed it on. " Was there any exciting gossip from Shillong ? " he asked.

McDermot looked up. " Nothing in particular," he

answered, "just engagements and marriages, the usual sequel to a hill station season."

"They are dangerous places, hill stations," broke in Dr. Brown. "I am always trying to persuade our valuable Resident to summer there once in a way. We could do with more ladies here."

"Indeed we could," agreed the Prince. "Tell us some of the happy couples, McDermot. I may know some of them."

The portwine had reached McDermot by now, he helped himself slowly before answering. "Well," he said at last, "Mrs. Hamilton's letter, as a matter of fact, was practically full of her brother-in-law's affair. Apparently the marriage is to take place from her house. Miss Williams, I think the girl's name is. New to the place, I fancy, I don't remember hearing of her before."

"Indeed," the Prince's long black fingers played with the stem of his wine glass, "that is interesting news to me, for I know the lady quite well, and of course I have met the Hamiltons." As once before his eyes met McDermot's. "And when did you say this wedding was to be?"

"To-morrow, I think, or the day after." McDermot leant back in his chair to accept a cigarette from the servant behind him.

"The day after, I hope," Ishaq Khan was saying, "for in that case my wedding present will arrive in time." He lifted his glass, drinking the wine.

"Shall we make a move into the billiard room?" he suggested a minute or two afterwards, "we are an unequal number to-night, but we can play a scratch game of sorts."

When his guests said good-night to him, and went forth to their various carriages, the Prince held McDermot back a moment to speak to him.

"I have made up my mind to stay, McDermot," he said, "it is evidently my duty. Will you call round sometime on Wednesday and we can talk of these matters that you say call for my attention? Or, I, if you would prefer it, will call at the Residency?"

"I will come here," McDermot answered, "and I am glad you see your way to staying. Good-night, Prince, hope we shall have good sport to-morrow."

"I also hope so, though unfortunately I shall not be able to attend." He followed them out on to the terrace, bowing gravely as they turned to call good-night.

"I don't know whether it struck you," Dr. Brown puffed at his cigar and surveyed the road in front of them, "but there is something up with our friend the Prince to-night, also how he hates you."

"Does he?" asked McDermot, a note of surprise in his voice; he flicked at the pony and the dogcart turned with a little lift into the gate of the Residency compound. "I know I annoy him sometimes and once—well, when I interfered about that so-called wife of his—I gathered he didn't love me, but I don't see why he should hate me."

"My good fellow," grumbled Dr. Brown, he turned at the top of the bungalow steps to deliver this ultimatum, "he hates the whole bang lot of us. It is my firm belief that he is a re-incarnation of Tippoo Sahib, and one day we, you and I and the missionaries, will get an unpleasant surprise."

"Rot," the Resident answered graphically ; he threw the pony's reins to the sais and stopped a moment to relight his cigar which had gone out, "We are as safe here, even if Tippoo Sahib were next door, as we should be in Bond Street. Hie, Rutna, whiskey peg lao."

A native bearer hurried out with tray and glasses in response to his summons, Brown waited till he had vanished back into the house leaving the two white men alone on the verandah before he continued the argument.

"I don't know," he said, "even Rutna, trusted servant as you would describe him, what does he feel for us, hatred or love ? You never get behind their brown masks of faces, and I have never met a native yet who would let me see into his eyes. I don't see any reason why they shouldn't hate us," he ended placidly.

"Don't you, well I do," said McDermot, "I have put into my life here more than my work, as I expect you know. I love them, I love the land, it is my little corner of God's earth. And some one has said somewhere that love begets love. Anyway," he stood up rather ashamed of the depths of his feelings, "I trust them, and I fancy they trust me back. Come along to bed, Brown, and don't try to think of any more arguments by which you can destroy my faith. What can you know of India, you with a heart always homesick for Ireland ? "

"True for you, old man," the doctor agreed ; he rose laughing, "I do not put as much into this heathenish country as you do ; pray God she doesn't ever fail you."

Brown, before he got into bed, stepped out on to the

verandah again to have a final look at things, as he put it. The compound lay in darkness, only the English girl's grave showing up ghost-like among the shadows. Great wonderful stars looked down from a purple sky. Here all was quiet, wrapped so it seemed in sleep, but over beyond the line of palm trees, because the night was so very very still, he could hear the sound of life and strife in the native bazaar, and the Prince's palace stood out, a white blur against the black background. Brown turned back, on either side of the verandah two huddled forms perched on high stools pulled at the punkah ropes with sleepy hands. They were the punkah men who were to sit thus through the night, jerking the suspended fan above the sahibs' beds. If they dropped asleep they would fall off the high stools, hence the choice of such a perch, for ordinarily speaking a native prefers the floor to sit on. Their forms were expressionless, only the slow jerk of their arms backwards and forwards proclaimed them alive.

"I wonder!" again thought the doctor, then he turned into bed and blew out the light, allowing his thoughts to be lulled to sleep by the steady drone and swing of the punkah overhead.

CHAPTER VIII

" Is this the love she dreamed of, for whose sake
 Her heart with too much bliss or pain would break ?
Nay, the gods jest, when this their gift appears
 Too dull for laughter, and too weak for tears."

ONE disturbing incident occurred on Esther and Gerald's wedding-day, otherwise it was a day of glorious, radiant weather, such as one meets only in the hill stations of India during a break in the rains. For weeks the outside world had been shrouded in mists and rain clouds, the sun had appeared, feeble and ashamed, only at very rare intervals, the rain had fallen a swift continuous downpour till the steep roads ran great rivulets of water and from every visible cliff or overhanging bank miniature waterfalls splashed and gurgled. But on this day the curtain of clouds split at the first ray of the sun, and as he climbed slowly up the sky, his radiance reached to and brightened everything. The path of heaven swept clear vivid blue at his approach, his rays threw an unearthly glamour over the wide far-reaching distance of the Himalayan snows, the world of hill and valley, light and shade, lay spread out before him shimmering and fresh washed, and down in the plains, countless rivers and tiny streams sparkled and shone like silver threads woven by some cunning hand in and out of the patterned landscape.

The wedding took place from the Hamiltons' house, by Mrs. Bullock's most earnest desire, and Mrs. Hamilton herself was only too willing to agree to it. Ever since that evening, when so she felt it to herself, she had failed Gerald, she had done her level best to fight down the barrier of dislike and reserve behind which her sister-in-law-to-be withdrew herself. But though the girl accepted all her efforts at friendliness with apathetic calm, Mrs. Hamilton—as only one woman can know of another—was aware that she would never now be able to wipe out the impression that Esther had formed of her. Outwardly all was calm friendliness, and as Mrs. Bullock, in the one interview she had with Mrs. Hamilton on the subject, pleaded almost with tears in her eyes to be relieved from the exertion of the wedding, it was thus arranged. Esther arrived the day before the ceremony to spend the night at the Hamiltons', Mrs. Bullock excused herself from even attending.

"See now, child," she said to Esther at their parting, "you are going out of my life, just as you came into it. You have lived with me two years, is it not so, and you have never thought of me as other than a vulgar fat old woman. Now wait," with a ponderous shrug of her shoulders as the girl would have protested. "I am vulgar, and fat, and old, but I am not a fool. And I have known your thoughts all the time, that is why I am not coming to the wedding. But I have known more than that too, and also I have known your mother. You have never opened your mouth to me about her, and that is good, for what could be said between us? but I will tell you this time so that you may understand how much I knew you." She paused rather heavily on the words,

she was old and fat as she had said, and this conversation woke memories she would rather have forgotten. Esther pushed her chair a little back, they were sitting out on the verandah after dinner, and by this movement she was without the circle of light thrown by the oil lamp swung above their heads. Her face was white, her hands strained together.

"Your mother was bad," Mrs. Bullock went on ponderously, "bad, all through, like only those with black hearts and red blood leaping in their veins can be. Bad as a child, bad as a girl, bad as a woman. But,"—the wheezy voice gathered dignity—"she was yet my sister, and I loved her."

"I suppose you think you have a right to say such things to me," Esther asked coldly, "because you took me to live with you, because I have taken charity at your hands?" She stood up, her chair grating harshly on the tiles as she pushed it back.

Mrs. Bullock rose also, the lamplight threw strange shadows on her bulgy cheeks, her unwieldy figure.

"No," she did not look towards Esther, her eyes wandered vaguely round the old familiar sights of hen-coop and gardens seen but dimly under the starlight, "it is not for any reason like that. It is because I loved her, and I knew. You are to have your chance as she never had hers." She turned into the house, her voice sounded tired and dragged a little. "Good-night," she said, "to-morrow it will be good-bye. I hope you will take your chance, that is all."

So Mrs. Bullock did not come to the wedding, and Mrs. Hamilton felt that even her absence, though Shillong might comment upon it, was better than her presence

would have been, since that would have emphasized too clearly the family into which Gerald had chosen to marry.

And despite the wonderful beauty of the day itself, Mrs. Hamilton found herself dressing for the occasion in an uneasy frame of mind. Presentiment, she would have called it if she had been Scotch ; as it was, Mary Ann, during the intricacies of fastening her mistress' dress, voiced the matter.

"It is a day of ill omen, memsahib," she remarked presently, "all the servant folk have spoken of it."

Now why one's feelings spoken aloud by some one else should be so annoying, it would be hard to say. Mrs. Hamilton was angry.

"You should not say those kind of things, Mary," she reproved sharply. "What business have you and the servants to discuss anything, I should like to know ?"

Mary Ann smoothed her face to an even more meaningless expression of amiability.

"None, memsahib," she hastened to agree, settling the long smooth grey folds of Mrs. Hamilton's dress, "only the missahib's ayah says there have been many tears shed in the night. To-day the bride goes heavily ; that is not good for the bridegroom."

She unobtrusively produced a pair of grey gloves and handed them to her mistress.

"The missahib's ayah should have known better than to repeat such things." Mrs. Hamilton was still visibly annoyed, and she swept from the room.

Downstairs, outside Miss Williams' room, she paused in some trepidation, her hand on the door. How would the girl receive her ? had there really been many tears shed in the night ? With a little movement of her shoulders, as

if setting aside trouble, she pushed open the door and entered.

Esther stood facing her. From the last strand of gold that shone in the hair under her veil, to the tip of one satin shoe a little thrust forward, she was beautiful, with a beauty that for a second took the other woman's breath away. Her dress, soft clinging satin, caught here a light, there a shade from every faint movement of her breath. Mrs. Hamilton took a little step towards her, holding out her hands. "My dear," she whispered, "you beautiful, beautiful thing."

Then it was that she noticed how straight and stiff the bride-clad figure stood, with hands clenched at her side, and wide, fear-haunted eyes, that strove to tell and yet to hide their fear. At her feet lay a half-open parcel, it seemed as if the contents had been examined and then dropped back into their wrappings, and so bundled to the floor. Mrs. Hamilton, because for the second she was at a loss for words, stooped to the parcel and picked it up.

"Another wedding present?" she asked, her voice shook a little. "Little late in arriving, isn't it?"

The girl did not answer. Mrs. Hamilton heard her take a sharp breath and turn away; for herself, her eyes were fixed on the gift that lay, now the paper had been removed from it, in her hand. It was surely a curious wedding present, just a little imitation native drum, the kind that the drummers hold and play on lazily with sinuous long fingers, while the dancing girls move, beckon and sway, in the circle of onlookers. The thing, despite its dainty finish, its gold and jewelled setting, was oddly repulsive; instinctively Mrs. Hamilton dropped it, holding her hands

away from her as if they had touched on something unclean.

"What is it?" she asked, "who sent it to you?"

The girl turned to face her again, but her eyes now were expressionless.

"I don't know," she answered carelessly; "but I think it is rather quaint, don't you?"

"I think it is hateful," Mrs. Hamilton spoke impulsively, and meeting the girl's faintly surprised smile she blushed. "It is native, I mean," she explained; "you will throw it away, won't you?"

"Perhaps," the girl answered; then with a swift change of tone: "Will I do, is it time to start?"

Mrs. Hamilton clutched bravely at her departing dignity. "You are perfect," she agreed, "and I suppose we had better be going. Gerald went off some time ago. But, dear, are you sure—" her eyes met those calm questioning ones, and the words broke off. "We will start if you are ready," she ended lamely.

All Shillong was at the wedding, and thronged afterwards to the Hamiltons' house, sipping champagne, tasting the cake, commenting on weddings in general, this one in particular, and brides as a whole. In the dining-room the bride and bridegroom stood side by side—Gerald one long positive smile that reached from ear to ear, Esther calm, quiet, withdrawn as ever..

Dr. Crow did what he described as his walk past, and then sought out Mrs. Hamilton. Mild, perturbed wonderment gazed out from the eye behind the eyeglass.

"What is it?" he queried, as soon as he had button-holed her. "For the life of me, I can't make out what it is, but something is up." His eyeglass clicked.

Mrs. Hamilton had been talking to Miss Thomas, the girl moved a little away as Dr. Crow came up.

"What is what?" Mrs Hamilton asked, "please don't be enigmatical to-day, Dr. Crow, my nerves won't stand it."

"That is it, then," he stated gravely; his eyeglass came back to place, he surveyed the room. "I knew some one's nerves were out of order, the atmosphere is tense with strained nerves. For a moment," he went on ruminating, "as I shook hands with the new Mrs. Hamilton, I thought it was she who was at fault, now I find, dear lady, that it is you."

He turned the full contemplation of his gaze on to Mrs. Hamilton; it brought, as he expected it would, an uneasy flush to her cheeks.

"You are always finding out absurd things," she answered in self-defence.

Miss Thomas came back to the discussion, her eyes today were perhaps a little too bright over the dark shadow that lay beneath them, but her smile was as frank and cheerful as ever.

"What has Dr. Crow been finding out, Mrs. Hamilton?" she asked. "No one is safe with a secret once his eyeglass looks into the matter."

"You are making a mess of my infirmity," remonstrated the little man, "and the real truth is that you are soul sick for——" he paused.

"For what?" Miss Thomas laughed. "I bet you don't know."

"For wedding cake," Dr. Crow ended gravely "don't attempt to deny it. If you will allow me," he crooked his arm, "I will conduct you to the place

where a nimble minion will provide us with our wants."

Miss Thomas laughed again. "I ask for soul comfort, and he gives me cake. Please notice Mrs. Hamilton. However, I will not say no."

Mrs. Hamilton sighed a little, watching the quaintly matched couple go across the room arm-in-arm. "I wonder if he has guessed her soul secret, poor little girl?" she thought. "Oh, why couldn't Gerald have wanted to marry her?"

The laughter and merriment went on, healths were proposed and returned, the bridegroom made a speech, described afterwards in the local papers as being of soldier-like brevity. The bride slipped away to change into travelling-dress, and came back presently all in soft grey blue, a wide blue feather sweeping round the brim of an altogether black hat. Then more excitement, wild throwing of rice and confetti as the couple hand-in-hand ran down the steps of the bungalow to the waiting rickshaws. The crowd on the steps and on the verandah raised a cheer as the rickshaws vanished round the bend of the drive.

"What means it that they tie old shoes thus to the back of the new memsahib's rickshaw?" whispered one of the back runners of the bride's rickshaw to his fellow.

"It is a sign that she is the man's for ever," the other answered gravely, but their whispered voices did not rise above the noise of the rickshaw wheels on the ground.

Jack Hamilton turned to his wife, the last guest having said farewell and taken his departure.

"Well, little woman," he said, putting an affectionate hand on her shoulder, "that is over, for which thanks be to Providence. I can only hope that brother of mine

will manage his own affairs for a bit. You have worried five grey hairs into your head over this."

His hand touched softly on the thick brown hair. "As if that mattered," Mrs. Hamilton answered. "Jack, oh Jack, I hope he will be happy." Her eyes were wistful, her voice troubled.

"Of course he will, anyway for a bit; only I could marry you, wife of mine. That is a compliment, and if you could stop thinking about my brother and devote a little attention to poor old me, I should be grateful."

"You!" Mrs. Hamilton smiled, but her eyes did not look at him, "you are so old and safe."

"Thank you," her husband bowed gratefully.

"But Gerald, somehow," she went on quickly, "the memory of his face, so pleased, so happy, to-day of all days, hurt me."

"Well, of all the unreasonable women, Heaven defend me," Jack Hamilton put two strong hands on his wife's shoulders and shook her gently. "Why shouldn't he look happy, to-day of all days?—answer me that, madam."

"I don't know," Mrs. Hamilton admitted; before his aggrieved bewildered face she had to laugh. None the less her eyes blinked back on the tears that struggled to them, and she turned and went back hastily into the house.

The offending present was not in sight in Esther's room. The ayah was busy smoothing out and folding up the wedding dress, the bulk of the luggage was piled up in a corner of the room. The newly married couple were to fetch it on their way in from the honeymoon,

which they were spending at one of the Government's bungalows down in a neighbouring valley.

"Did the missahib leave any presents to be packed?" Mrs. Hamilton asked the woman.

"No, memsahib," the ayah looked up from her work to answer; "the missahib took this morning's gift with her in the little handbag; I was not allowed to touch it."

There was a glint of curiosity in the woman's eyes, her busy brain was evolving more information for the servants' quarter.

Mrs. Hamilton made no answer and she turned and went from the room. The uneasiness had returned four-fold to her heart. And it was this little incident of the native drum which was to stand out more clearly in her memory than any other event of Gerald's wedding-day.

CHAPTER IX

“A trifle makes a dream—
A trifle breaks it.”

THE Dhak-bungalow of Panchraste lies, as its name implies—Panch meaning five, and raste roads—at the starting-point of five valley paths. It is a Government building, kept up for the use of the district officer on his bi-yearly tours of inspection. That is to say, here he pitches camp either on his outward or return march to Shillong. These tours are perhaps the most enviable duty that falls to the lot of the Indian civil servant. To leave your dusty files and offices, your social life and duties, the daily routine of civilization, and hie out into the wilds—be they the stretching plains of the Punjab, the jungles and rice-fields of Bengal, or the above all fascinating mountain world of the hill districts—must hold a decided charm. Ordinarily speaking, the judge or collector travels with his household complete : unlike the snail he does not carry it on his back, but it goes with him and things are very comfortably arranged by the unlimited number of servants he has at his disposal. He strikes camp early in the day, and, riding or driving as his choice may be, covers between twenty and thirty miles each day of the district to be inspected. He may go a circuitous route, sometimes he will turn aside to inspect this village, or

look to the making of that well : his fatherly eye has to inspect the management of the village school, and his word is needed to settle some dispute between two farmers. Often wild duck shooting or even larger game will call for his attention. Meanwhile his household, consisting as it does of his bedroom tent, his reception tent, his kitchen tent and all the little etcs. which make for comfort, accompanied by a vast retinue of servants, goes straight for the next camping ground, and by midday everything is prepared—which everything includes a hot bath—and awaiting the sahib's presence. Then a peaceful afternoon is passed, holding a semi-court in the reception tent, till evening, which brings a good dinner, a comfortable smoke, and a friendly bonfire outside your tent door. Perhaps the programme seems a little lonely, but most Englishmen are at heart wanderers, and it is during these touring seasons that men learn to know and love India as those who would govern her must know and love her.

At stated intervals along the line of inspection there are Government bungalows, such as the one that lies perched on a little mound, overlooking the valleys of Panchraste, and it was to this place, which had been lent them by Mr. Hamilton, that Gerald and his wife came the evening of their wedding day. It had been an easy downhill run for the rickshaw men, and the distance of ten miles had been covered at a steady trot. It was still early in the evening when they drew up before the steps of the little whitewashed bungalow.

It stands in an ideal setting, this house, built by some long ago forest officer, the very square precision of the English planned building fitting in quaintly with the mad

profusion of Nature all around. Low among the trees, its roof moss-grown, and spotted here and there with colour where the goldmohur blossoms from a neighbouring tree had fallen. The servants had been sent down before them, everything was in readiness : the green-shuttered windows of the rooms had been thrown open to the air and sunshine, tea was awaiting them in the cool shady verandah.

Gerald helped Esther from her rickshaw, noticing with rather anxious eyes how white her face was. The hands in his were cold, the girl's eyes would not meet his own. For a moment it damped his spirits, he had been so radiantly happy that, till this moment, other thoughts had been pushed from his mind. Now suddenly he remembered how Esther had faced him that evening in Mrs. Hamilton's drawing-room. "I don't love you," she had said, and that, he remembered, with a little twinge of conscience, had been her attitude ever since. He was going to teach her to love him. That he never doubted, but meanwhile the girl was without doubt frightened and overstrained by the position in which she found herself.

"By Jove," Gerald thought contritely, "what a brute I have been. I have just been content to imagine she was as gloriously happy as I am, whereas—" The sudden instinctive thought made him very gentle to the girl, and for the time being, with a loyalty for which Esther hardly gave him credit, he pushed back all desire to make love to her.

"This is good, isn't it?" he asked. "And here is tea. Are you too tired, Esther, and too fed up with wedding cake, to want any? I am as hungry as a hunter."

"No, I am not tired," the girl answered. She sat

down listlessly in the chair he pulled forward, her hands clasped in front of her, her eyes on the flowers outside. She was palpably nervous. Once or twice Gerald thought her mouth quivered, as if she were on the point of tears, and he longed to take her into his arms, more than he had ever wanted to before, and kiss those wistful eyes. Yet with the mistaken generosity of a very honest heart he crushed back the idea, schooling himself to cheerful friendliness instead.

"Take off your hat," he suggested. "I'll put it into your room, for you, and take great care not to put it upside down. You will be more comfortable without it."

Esther put up hands that shook a little to find the hatpins. She had drunk the tea he had poured out for her, and eaten the offered cake with the same passive obedience. Her eyes, just for the second that she handed the hat to him, did meet Gerald's—he could have sworn there was terror in them.

He came back to the verandah, after having put the hat down, and drawing up a chair, sat down a little nearer to her. Esther did not look up, and he leant forward to put one of his big, strong hands over hers.

"Look here, little girl," he said, "you are worrying over something. I hate to see you like this, especially as I expect it is my fault. Dear, I want you to understand that you need never be afraid or nervous because of me. I don't know how to put it any plainer just for the present, but I am going out for a good long walk somewhere to worry it out, and you are going to go in to lie down; rest—sleep if you can. Then we will have dinner out here if you feel up to it, if not, you shall have it in your room. You are never to worry about

anything," he added, with mock solemnity, trying to win a smile from her, "least of all about me."

Esther stood up; she swayed a little, and twice she tried to speak, but her throat was dry and the words would not come. "I suppose I am tired," she said at last. "I'll go to my room as you suggest." Her eyes wavered, as if still unwilling to meet his, but she held out her hands to him. "I am not afraid of you, Gerald"—her voice dropped to a whisper—"don't go far."

Perhaps if he had been a little less conscientious, a little less whole-heartedly anxious to serve her and not himself, Gerald might in that moment when, of her own free-will, she turned to him, have straightened out the tangled knot in their thread of life. As it was he merely lifted her cold hands to his lips and kissed them, and instead of the great love his heart held for her she saw only the smile in his eyes, and felt how hopelessly far away he was from her.

Gerald, striding along for his four mile walk, was met by his orderly, Shahjahan, at the gate of the compound. The man's face wore a wide smile; his eyes beamed at his master. He had a piece of news which he knew would appeal to the Sahib if his mind were not too fully occupied with the new mem to heed it.

"Sahib," he said deferentially, placing himself in Gerald's path and salaaming, "a man of the village has given me news of a tiger near to here."

He looked anxiously for the expected flash of interest—if anything was dear to the heart of Shahjahan it was a tiger shoot. His master, however, appeared to be moodily uninterested; he did not so much as stay his walk, and Shahjahan was obliged to drop into pace a few

steps behind and carry on his information rather jerkily.

"He is of full age, this tiger, Sahib, and has done much damage to the cattle of the poor folk round here. Now they fear even for their own lives, since two days gone he has killed and eaten of man's flesh—that is to say, 'twas but a woman, and a widow at that; still, the taste is without doubt the same."

"What are you talking about, Shahjahan," Gerald interrupted impatiently; "this is no time for such talk."

None the less his ear had been caught. Shahjahan breathed freely. "I was but saying, huzoor," he volunteered merrily, "that all arrangements have been made by me. I have prepared the beat, the bullock is tied in a lucky place. If the sahib will but sit up for half the night, without doubt a noble animal will fall to his gun."

Gerald paused; an idea was slowly forming in his mind. After all, here lay a sure and certain method of setting Esther's fear at rest, and for himself—well, it would at least provide something which would take him away from the goal of his own thoughts.

"How far is the kill?" he asked.

"But a stone's throw from the house, huzoor," Shahjahan answered eagerly.

"Very well, then,"—Gerald had made up his mind suddenly, and for some reason the weight of perplexity seemed lifted thereby—"I will come. See to my gun; we will take up our position ere the moon rises; that will be time enough. And now leave me. I would be alone."

"Huzoor," Shahjahan salaamed, a smile of triumph on his countenance, and turning disappeared in the direction of the village to complete his preparations, and also to obtain his bet money from the insolent stranger who had

dared to assert that his, Shahjahan's, sahib would prove a laggard when hunting was in question.

Gerald, on his return to the bungalow, found Esther waiting for him on the verandah. She had changed from her going away finery into a white evening dress, her hair was done high in a bewildering new fashion, so that it formed a crown of gold for her face. She had rouged her cheeks, Gerald noticed with a shock of surprise, just ever so lightly. It made her more than ordinarily beautiful, but somehow he did not like it. She had been sitting inertly on one of the long verandah chairs, but as he came up the steps she rose quickly and came across to meet him.

" You have come back," she said. There was a ring of something in her voice, it might have been relief. Gerald's tingling nerves chose to ascribe it to uneasiness. He thought her eyes looked as if she had been crying, and gathered that it was the marks of tears she had been attempting to obliterate on her face. So intent was he on his observations, that he did not notice she was holding out her hands to him, and Esther drew them back quickly.

" Rested, Esther ? " he asked, throwing his hat on one of the chairs and lighting a cigarette for himself. " That's right. I'll have a tub and change too ; then we will have dinner out here. It is a ripping little spot, isn't it ? Ever seen such goldmohurs in your life before ? "

He moved across, and leant over the verandah rail to pull one of the branches down to him. The girl did not follow him ; she went back to her chair again and sat down.

" They are very beautiful," she said, " but I don't

like them very much." The note of expectancy, or whatever it was, had gone from her voice, it sounded tired.

Gerald flicked back the branch he had been trying to pluck for her, and turned. "Perhaps they are a bit heavy," he said. "I'll be off and change; shan't be five minutes. Hie bearer," he shouted in Hindustani, "Memsahib and I will dine out here, fetch dinner quick."

Shhajahan padded about briskly important, laying the dinner while his master dressed. Once or twice he stole a look at the new Memsahib. Without doubt the sahib had told her of his intention to shoot the tiger, and like all women-kind she was bitter because of it. They would tie their men-folk to them night and day—women—if they had but their will. This one sat very quiet, her eyes fixed on the goldmohur blossoms. Once or twice her lips moved, but Shahjahan, even if he had been able to hear would not have understood, for she spoke in English.

"You know," said Gerald, half-way through dinner—he was still laboriously cheerful,—"you don't eat enough to keep a mouse alive, Esther. What am I to do with you?"

The girl lifted her eyes for a moment. "I can't eat to-night," she answered stiffly.

Gerald said "Damn" under his breath. He himself was making none too good a meal. He pushed his untouched pudding away now and stood up. "Let's have coffee and smokes outside, shall we, Esther? It seems somehow awfully airless to-night."

The servants carried out chairs and a table for the coffee and drinks, setting them down on the little strip

of paved ground which lay in front of the verandah. Gerald decided they would do without a lamp ; it merely served to attract countless moths and night beetles. They could see quite well without it, for though the moon had not yet risen, there was a glow in the skies heralding her arrival, and in any case their chairs were hardly beyond the circle of light thrown from the verandah lamps.

After the servants had vanished back to the house, they sat in silence. He would not look at her because the pulse of his desire was hard to keep in check, and he could not carry on the game of cheerfulness any longer. He had a feeling that his voice would give him away ; it would ring with all he so much longed to say to her. So he smoked instead, and listened to the wild unearthly noises which were echoing from the bazaar. They were preparing for his night's sport with a vengeance. Once Esther moved a little nearer him ; he could hear her breath coming and going ; what on earth was she thinking of ? What nerving herself to bear ? At last he could stand it no longer ; let him have it out with her and know that she at least was content.

"Esther," he said suddenly, and he turned to face her in the gloom, "you remember what you said about not loving me when you promised to marry me, and how I promised never to ask from you more than you could give of your own free will ? Well, I have not forgotten the promise, things are not changed between us, dear. Do you understand ?" He stood up. "You have been frightened of me all to-day, and I—I can't bear it. Men are made different to women, Esther ; that is a thing that boys at least learn early in life. We have different forces —passions, I suppose they would be called—that sway us

more strongly than women can ever understand. I—well, I love you, dear, and it is just more than I can do to-night to sit beside you, look at you, talk to you, like any ordinary friend. I am mad, mad for the touch of you, the heart of you. Oh, forgive me, dear, if I stayed by you any longer, I should come so near to failing you that I might lose all. So—I—I am going to spend the night away from here. There is a tiger in the neighbourhood, Shahjahan tells me; I shall sit up on the chance of getting a shot at it.” He ended rather abruptly; Gerald had never been capable of sustained eloquence.

Esther stood up, her figure an indistinct blur of white to his eyes. “You are going to leave me—alone?” she said. This time there was unmistakable fear in her voice.

“Is is the only thing I can do,” Gerald answered shortly.

The girl shivered ever so slightly. Gerald chose to decide that it was a sigh of relief.

“Alone,” she whispered again; her hands went up to her throat. Then suddenly she began to laugh, softly, uncannily. Any woman could have told the boy there was hysteria behind that laugh. “That’s funny,” she said, “very funny.” She laughed again and turned to go back into the house. “I hope you will have good sport,” she added, stopping for a moment on the steps to look back at him.

Gerald stood and stared after her. That she should have laughed passed all his bounds of comprehension and cut at his heart like a knife. His attempted explanation had made him appear a fool in her eyes, that was all. What a damned fool he was, and what a damned world

this was to live in. He upset the table as he turned to go. The house was hateful to him, he would not wait to go back there; Shahjahan should fetch him what he required for the night.

“Shahjahan,” his voice rang out in a shout, “come quickly, you lazy devil, it is time we started.”

CHAPTER X

“ The depth and dream of my desire,
The bitter paths in which I stray,
Thou knowest who has made the fire,
Thou knowest who has made the clay.”

THE scent of the moghra trees, heavy as it had been in the day-time, gathered strength it would seem, when night fell. The perfume of them was flooding the little verandah as Esther came up the steps ; behind her she could hear the quick sound of the table Gerald overturned in his haste and his shouts for Shahjahan. From within the lighted room her ayah rose to greet her, sleepy and frankly yawning. Esther paused a moment to turn and look back into the darkness of the garden and to her overwrought nerves it seemed that the heavy scent thrown out by the waxen flowers was the same as that which had clung so tenaciously to her from the burnt ashes of Ishaq Khan’s letter.

“ Will memsahib want for anything to-night ? ” the ayah’s voice broke into her fancies, “ if not, have I leave to go and prepare my food ? Here there are no other women to cook for me and the village is far off.”

“ Go, oh yes go.” Esther spoke quickly, her hands were working within each other. “ I shall not go to bed yet. I will ”—her eyes glanced from side to side as if looking

for something—"I will take a book and sit on the verandah" she decided.

The woman watched her with curious eyes, but content to have achieved her own ends did not stop to offer any suggestion as to the lateness of the hour. She turned to go impassively; the white folks' dealings were generally beyond her understanding.

"And Rabea, wait," Esther's voice arrested her, "send one of the rickshaw men to sit here on the steps. I am nervous; we are so near the jungle and the sahib has gone out."

Yes, that was the bottom of the trouble, Bagoo reflected, the sahib had gone out; such was indeed strange behaviour for a wedding night. She carried out her mistress's wish, anyhow, passing on the order in shrill tones to the servants' quarters, and to Luximan, chief runner to the memsahib's rickshaw, was deputed the task. It was not altogether to his liking, that must be admitted; the jungle held far more terrors for him than it could for Esther; still there was the white lady and her halo of light to keep off the evil spirits, and Luximan with one eye fixed on this moral supports quatted on his haunches with his back to the forest and a firm determination not to think of the awful things he might see in his mind.

So placed he was hardly calculated to see the approach of the house, none the less it was not only his native ear trained to detect the slightest sound that led him to know that some one or something was about to arrive. For the memsahib was seeing what he only heard, she had risen to her feet and her hands had gone to her throat. The book she had been holding fell to the ground at her move-

ment and Luximan scrambled to his feet. If she was afraid, it was nothing to the horror that was holding him ; not for the world's wealth would he have faced round on what she was seeing. It came then as a relief that the next sound which broke the tense silence should be a man's voice speaking in what Luximan could recognize as the white man's tongue. Here then was no ghost or evil spirit ; with his courage returned Luximan turned to greet the intruder who stood before him tall and suave, a native in the dress of the sahib log.

Luximan was not a resident of Shillong for nothing ; he knew the man at once and after a brief salaam turned to reassure his mistress who had without doubt been frightened. Ishaq Khan was before him though ; with a quick muttered word in Hindustani to Luximan he pushed past him and was standing by Esther on the verandah.

The girl's hands fell slowly to her sides, she made no attempt to greet him but her eyes, wide and frightened, stayed on his. This, though as a rule he was not prone to observations, Luximan noticed and unobtrusively, for Ishaq Khan's order had been for him to remove himself, he squatted back on his haunches and proceeded to watch events. The couple on the verandah were unconscious of his presence, certainly Ishaq Khan was unaware of it.

" Well," he whispered, bending a little to Esther bringing his head on a level with hers, " you got my letter, and it has come true, has it not ? You are alone ? "

At the nearness of his presence the girl stepped back, her hands catching desperately to the back of the chair, holding on to it as a drowning man might to a plank of wood.

"Why have you come?" she forced herself to answer.

"Did you neither expect nor want me, Esther?" the man answered; his voice had some strange compelling power behind it; to Esther it seemed as if a living force passed over her, pulling at every nerve in her body till it ached with the strain. Luximan watching, saw her loose her hold of the chair and pass her hand over her face as if in so doing she pushed something from her, then she turned and walked quickly to the verandah rails.

"Please go away," she said; her words came quickly, she turned to face Ishaq Khan her hands clenched in front of her. "I don't know what you are trying to make me do, but it is evil. I will not do it. I will not listen. Oh, if you have any feeling for me in your heart, like you have pretended to have, you will go away now at once."

"Pretended," the man's curiously intent voice repeated the word scornfully, "I have pretended, you say. Why, you know, the whole of your heart and body this moment is telling you how little pretence there can be between us." He followed to her side once more and stood staring down at her. "I love you, Esther, as you love me. Your wedding, this thick-headed husband, is not going to change things between us. I have always loved you, and you me since the world began."

He bent towards her and Luximan, still intently watching, saw the white girl shiver a little.

"It isn't love," Esther answered; her hands closed and unclosed, she turned a little from the man; something that Gerald had said earlier in the evening stirred across her brain. "You weave some spell over me," she went on speaking dully. "When your hands are on me I have no

thoughts, no will of my own, but it is not love. Oh, will you not go ? " she turned desperately to him again, " go quickly, as I ask you to and leave me to find what good I can in my heart."

Ishaq Khan watched her, his eyes narrowed to a smile, he was so sure of victory with what she had admitted between them that he could afford to wait a little for his triumph.

" You funny white child," he whispered softly, but he made no attempt to touch or hold her. " Perhaps it is love then that you feel for this husband of yours whose hands can send no message to your heart, whose kisses mean nothing to you."

He drew a little nearer to her ; to Esther it seemed as if his presence filled the whole world, and once again as if afraid of his nearness she put out her hands to push him away.

" Yes," she answered ; her words came a little hurriedly, " yes, yes, and he loves me ; I want his love to grow up like a shield between me and "—her voice dropped—" you," she whispered, and drew back, her hands again hiding her face in them, shrinking as far away as possible against the verandah railings.

Ishaq Khan's smile widened into a little laugh. " Why ? " he asked, " in the name of all the loves of the world, why ? My poor little white rose, you are fighting against Fate. Even your own heart whispers that to you, and see, you are shutting your eyes to the truth. Give your hands to mine, little white rose, let me teach you life's lesson and show you the glory of it."

He had a wonderful voice, this man, soft and compelling with the strength that lay behind the words. Esther's

hands fell away from her eyes and her face piteous in its weakness was lifted to his.

" You will come now, little white rose, is it not so ? if I hold out my arms you will creep in close to my heart, your mouth is eager for my kisses. But wait, let the dark and the moonlight, the scent of flowers, the call of life in the jungles speak for me too."

He stepped back a little and bending over the lamp blew it out gently. In place of its rather crude glare a wonderful moon flooded the verandah, leaving grotesque black shadows in the corners where her light could not permeate but touching everything else with her magical fairy fingers. The flowering branches of the trees took on ethereal dancing shapes under her light ; the glimpses of faint far-away skies showed deep purple ; all the air was laden with mystery, scented with moonshine and flowers and behind and around night hung heavy and intense, the great heart of the world beating through the silence in answer to the passion of the moon.

Luximan stirred and coughed uneasily. The blowing out of the lamp caused him intense discomfort, not from any moral disapproval—Luximan was too thoroughly Eastern to bother much over morality—but with the moon as sole illumination the jungle world took on horrible imagined shapes and figures. He would like to have risen and fled but something held him to his post and he stayed, hunched up on the steps, eyes staring into the darkness.

Ishaq Khan had moved back softly to Esther's side ; she could feel him near her and hear his breath as it came and went. What had she been fighting against—shame ? What had she dreaded—loss of pride and honour ? The

moonlight flickered and beckoned before her eyes—the scent of the flowers mounted to her brain. Did anything in the whole world matter so long as this man's arms held her and his voice was in her ears. Unknowingly, almost swayed by the strong forces that were driving her on, she put out her hands, leaning a little towards him and in a moment his arms were round her, his lips had found her mouth.

The silence grew really more than Luximan could bear; what strange shape was that stirring in the patch of jungle just beyond where the gate post showed white? had it not eyes that glinted and glowed in the dark, and a heavy moving body, monstrous and grotesque. Surely it was creeping closer with every movement, hugging the shadows truly—such evil things of the night fear even moonlight—but none the less drawing nearer and nearer. If the lamp had only been alight that would have served to ward off the monster, but as it was—beast, god, or devil, it was undoubtedly getting near enough to leap and—with a shriek of horror Luximan sprang to his feet.

“Koi ata ahi, bhut, bhut!”¹ he yelled and made a rapid dive up the verandah.

His panic communicated itself to the servants' quarters; agitated cries answered his, lights twinkled in all directions.

Ishaq Khan pushed Esther to one side and grabbed at Luximan's flying form.

“What devil's game is this, spawn of the evil one?” he asked, shaking the man to silence.

Luximan summoned what control he could over his

¹ “Some one is coming—a ghost, a ghost.”

fear-driven nerves ; a crowd of fellow servants had gathered round him, the head man was carefully relighting the lamp.

"Something crept at me from the shadows," he explained ; then becoming suddenly aware of the hate in Ishaq Khan's eyes his voice quailed. "I was afraid, afraid," he repeated.

Ishaq Khan flung him aside. "May fear choke you next time" he muttered, then dismissing the rest of the servants with a few quick words he turned again to Esther who pale and shivering had sunk back into the chair.

"There is nothing to fear, Esther," he said taking her two hands and drawing her to her feet, "but we had better get away as soon as possible. Your husband may have heard that idiot yelling. You will come with me now, will you not ? there is no more doubt in your heart. My beautiful white rose. My rose." He drew her into his arms and bent his head to kiss her again, but the spell had been broken ; with a strength she hardly knew herself to be possessed of Esther wrenched herself free from his arms and stood away.

"No," she said, "no. It is the evil in me that answers to your call and I—I want to fight against it, other things in my life shall give me strength to win. Oh, don't think I don't know or can't understand all that your hold on me means. I have known good and evil all my life and I want the good. I want to choose the good. You must go, go now, go quickly."

This time more force than pleading sounded in her voice. "I will call the servants back, I will get help, Luximan shall fetch my husband, oh go—go quickly."

Ishaq Khan knew himself defeated ; when you are relying upon passion for your victory and feeling suddenly becomes subservient to will, it spells defeat. There was murder in his heart for the moment though nothing of this showed in his face.

"Very well ;" he infused a certain amount of mock humility into his words. "I will go since you so decide. But you are mine, Esther, why struggle, if not now then a little later you will come to me, you will need me. And I can wait for that. Listen," he held up his hand and from the distant village came the low throbbing note of a tom-tom played on by some master hand. "It is the sound of my heart, the voice of my desire which will follow you even across the seas and bring you back."

It was wise to leave her on that, a finished exit. Esther sat after he had gone a huddled figure in the chair, her hands over her eyes, fighting as she had never fought before against her own tumultuous desires, against the memory of his lips on hers. And passion once roused by whatever cause is not a thing easily quenched or forgotten.

CHAPTER XI

“ You'll love me yet, and I can tarry
Your love's protracted growing.”

R. Browning.

THE young Hamiltons went back to Shillong next day, merely stopping to collect their luggage and then catching the night mail down to Bombay and the P. & O. steamer on which they had booked their passages to England. For the real honeymoon, so Gerald was at some pains to explain to himself, was to be spent in Scotland, up in the north of Forfar where his old home lay. A land of moor and heather hills, swept by the four winds of heaven, sweet scented, sunny, clean. There he would set himself to the winning of Esther, and in those surroundings surely she would wake from the hateful influence that so far held her.

Though the carrying out of his plan was by no means easy, still the casual events of the journey, the fact that for the next three weeks they would be travelling, in no small measure aided him.

Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton travelled with them as far as Bombay. Jack had some official reason for the journey and Marjorie went ostensibly to see the young couple off. They were two days and two nights in the train and in the end Marjorie's heart was no nearer being satisfied as to the probability of Gerald's future happiness. Esther appeared curiously quiet and apathetic ; she

hardly ever spoke to any of the party, rarely even looked at Gerald. She sat for the most part, her hands on her lap, her eyes studying the landscape as it flashed and slipped past the windows. Gerald and Jack played picquet, bought innumerable books and papers, got out at nearly every station to stretch their legs. Sometimes the train would come to some long pause at the larger terminuses, Delhi, Allahabad, Lahore, and the whole party would disembark to get a meal of sorts in the station restaurant. Then Jack, the idea that a party of four might be rather wearisome to a newly married couple was beginning to dawn on him, would suggest to Marjorie that they should take a stroll, the train was not due to start for half an hour, a walk would do her good. And they would go and come back to find Gerald and Esther already ensconced in the carriage, Gerald buried in a book, Esther back in her old seat watching the native crowds on the platform.

"Things," as Jack remarked to Marjorie on one of these occasions just as they drew near the carriage door, "are not as they ought to be. Shall I say something to Gerald or what about your tackling the girl?"

"It wouldn't be any use," answered Marjorie, "they must go their own way, Jack, but I wish it hadn't had to happen."

"An involved sentence, dear," remonstrated her husband. He generously forbore to add what he thought, that he had warned her from the beginning not to encourage the match.

The P. & O. docks in Bombay present a scene of busy confusion on the outgoing or incoming of the Indian mails. There are so many luggage-laden coolies, all rushing about, aimlessly it would appear to any one unac-

customed to native methods, so much shouting and shrill voiced arguments on all sides. A shed, which has been erected only since plague took a firm grip on India, stands in the middle of the scene; through this the would-be passengers have to proceed in single file to have their temperatures taken and their tongues inspected, and after that there can be no further good-byes or intercourses of any sort save hand waving with those who are left behind. Even the luggage has here to be handed over to the ship's stewards, but though his actual labours cease at that moment, the average coolie can be relied on to carry forward his busy noise and confusion over nothing until the ship is actually under weigh. And over all this tumult and mass of moving people imagine a blue sky and a blazing sun which seems to turn even the distant sea into a pool of molten brass.

That is what it appeared to be like to Gerald Hamilton as he stood with Esther and Mrs. Hamilton a little withdrawn from the pushing excited mass of natives. For the first time in his life he could understand something of his sister-in-law's feelings towards India. It was certainly excessively hot; he was beginning to think that he hated this same strong sunshine, this vivid, coloured life. Thank goodness, they were getting away from it for a bit, going back to a land where life slipped by more sanely, where the sun on blue water did not shrivel up your eyes to look at it.

" You are glad to be going, aren't you ? " he asked suddenly of Esther, touching the hand that lay near his; Mrs. Hamilton had hurried off to speak to some one she knew in the crowd and for the moment they were alone. " To-day I feel as if I should like to know I was never

coming back. It feeds one up this kind of glaring heat, doesn't it?"

Esther looked up at him; her hand tightened on his. "Don't let us come back," she whispered. "I—I hate it all, I never want to see it again."

Gerald was a little disturbed at the intensity of her answer and almost instinctively it switched him back to the common-sense view of things.

"I felt like hating it too for the minute," he said; his eyes lingered over the crowd and met those of Shahjahan who was standing patient and devoted keeping guard over his sahib's hatbox and golf sticks. "But it is not really so bad, Esther," he added. "You will feel different about it when we have been home for a bit. And we will have to come back; there is the regiment, and Shahjahan, and—well my life lies out here." He half regretted having grumbled about it to her; he did not want her to feel about India quite what Marjorie did; that would not make for happiness.

"I think I shall always hate it," she answered now slowly and her hand slipped from his.

Jack came up at the moment, very hot, very out of breath with his efforts; he had been struggling with a whole army of police chuprassis and the young couple's luggage.

"Everything is all right now I think," he volunteered. "I have passed the luggage through, though the clerk was a born fool and wanted some talking to. Better think about shipping yourself I fancy, most of the crowd are shifting. Where is Marjorie? Oh, talking to the Beamens; I suppose Mrs. B. is going home with you; she does a yearly bunk to England about this time."

He moved across in the direction of his wife, Esther following, Gerald turned aside for a second to give some farewell instructions to Shahjahan.

"See to it the ponies are properly fed and looked after," he said in the man's vernacular; "I return in three months, Shahjahan."

"In three months," the man answered eagerly; "may the days slip by; all shall be safe in my hands, huzoor."

"Right," answered Gerald, he smiled good-naturedly; he was fond of old Shahjahan though he had very little idea of how deeply and devotedly this fondness was returned. "Salaam, Shahjahan, salaam."

Then he joined the rest of his party and a few minutes later, having shaken Jack warmly by the hand and reassured Marjorie about his absolute happiness, he found himself standing with Esther and a crowd of fellow-passengers by the deck rails, watching while the great steamer, a slow moving island of wood and iron, detached herself from the quay and settled heavily to her three weeks' task, cutting a way through the quiet harbour waters out into the moving sun-bathed sea beyond.

Slowly, so slowly at first that the movement was scarce noticeable, yet the people on shore, within arms' reach a moment earlier were now almost indistinguishable the one from the other; slowly, while the palm trees and roofs and towers of Bombay all melted and blended together; slowly, till the harbour lay behind them a mass of shimmering gold with its boats and islands and far hills beyond, like specks of black upon its brightness. Then, with the first wave, gentle yet strong enough to lift ever so slightly this monster of man's making, the ship was at sea; no method now of saying whether she

was going fast or slow for even the last outreaching finger of land, Colaba Lighthouse, had dropped out of sight behind, and around as far as eye could see was nothing but the blue moving mass of the Indian Ocean.

The passengers dispersed one by one to their various cabins, over nearly every one of them hung the shadow of parting and it would be a day or two before the ship could waken to the proper cheerfulness of a home-going crew. Esther and Gerald stayed on deck longer than the others ; he had pulled up their chairs behind the shadow of the music room, out of the glare of the sun and facing the open pathway of the sea that lay in front of them.

"I hate seeing land dropping out of sight behind a ship," he explained to Esther. "We will sit and look at Bombay on our way back, but for the present I am all for England."

"Yes," said Esther ; the shadow of restraint that had been on her ever since the night of their marriage seemed to have left her for the minute ; she leant forward in her chair putting her hand on his knee, laughing a little perplexed laugh. "England, and you and I, how strange it seems."

"I think," said Gerald ; he took courage to place his hand on hers, and inwardly his heart shouted for joy, "I think it sounds just ripping, Esther, to hear you say 'you and I.' "

His hand warm on hers, his earnest young face so near her own, here lay her chance, Esther knew, the chance her mother had so much longed she should have. If she could only love him, only rest content with what his love would mean for her.

She let her hand lie under his, and silence, because

his heart was too full to speak and she was content to sit quiet, held them. Then from somewhere quite near at hand, the loud clamour of the dressing-bell sounded, and coming out of their reverie with a start they realized that day was practically over. The sun, a great red ball of fire, was sinking, frizzling it almost seemed as it touched and dropped into the sea. The sky had changed to purple; here and there, in the quick coming of an eastern night, bright stars shot out amidst its darkness. Esther stood up.

"I suppose," she said, "we must go downstairs and unpack something before dinner. We have been dreaming till it is quite late, Gerald."

"Yes," he agreed; he stood up too, quite close to her, yet not touching her. As she started to move away from him though, the great restraint he had been putting upon himself broke a little.

"Esther," he whispered, and all his love and longing sounded in that low word.

She turned at once; here was her chance, as she had realized from the first, let her take it and make the most of it. The barrier of his or her making that had stood between them was down now, his arms were round her, she could feel, close up against her heart his own heart beating fast and furiously. Her breath came quick, in a little shaken sob. "Love me, Gerald," she begged, scarce knowing the words she said, "and make me love you, I am not strong enough without your love."

But even as he kissed the words of her pleading silent on her lips, and his face shut out the rest of the world from her eyes, some little imp of knowledge woke and snickered in Esther's heart. "This will not hold you," it

laughed quite clear and sharp, and through the glamour of the moment Esther knew the truth of its message.

Jack and Mrs. Hamilton meanwhile having watched the steamer till the faces on board her grew unrecognizable, turned and making their way through the crowd found their carriages and drove back to the hotel. A telegram was waiting Jack in the hall, not a long message but worded to the point. "Trouble in Bholpur, can you come, McDermot."

"Nuisance," Jack commented and frowned; "shall have to go I expect; what will you do, Marjorie, come with me or go straight through to Calcutta?" He handed the telegram to her.

"Come with you, of course," she said, "even though McDermot does not seem to ask me."

"Most probably hopes I will have the sense not to bring you," her husband admitted. "I don't know that he isn't right."

"I am coming anyway," interrupted Mrs. Hamilton; she slipped her arm into his. "I insist on the prerogative of being blown up with my husband."

"If I thought it was a question of that you may be quite certain you would not be allowed to come," laughed her husband, "but as it is, come, I expect you are as curious to see Ishaq Khan as I am. Wonder how he took Gerald's wedding."

"So do I," admitted Marjorie; then quickly for the name had brought back Gerald to her mind; "I wish we hadn't interfered, Jack; I don't believe Esther is going to make Gerald happy, I would much rather now she had married Ishaq Khan."

"Nonsense and heresy all in one breath," remon-

trated her husband. "As far as I know Ishaq Khan has already twelve legal wives, and as for Gerald and the girl they will settle down all right in time."

But Mrs. Hamilton's mind on the subject of Gerald and Esther refused to be pacified so easily, and the reflection that she had at least spoilt Ishaq Khan's game was bringing her for the time being remarkably little satisfaction.

CHAPTER XII

“ By all ye cry or whisper, by all ye leave or do,
The sullen silent peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.”

R. Kipling

“ **T**HIS is the way of it,” explained McDermot ; he leant a little forward in his long chair tapping the arm of it as if to emphasize his words. “ I don’t for a moment anticipate any real trouble, Hamilton, for I am prepared and if the worst comes to the worst can squash it with a heavy hand, only I wanted if possible to do without that kind of thing, and I played you as my trump card.”

“ I see,” said Hamilton ; he nodded. The two men sat in the verandah of the Residency smoking a final cigar before turning in to dress for the dinner-party McDermot was giving in honour of the Hamiltons’ presence. “ And the trouble is you think widespread ? ”

“ It has reached to every outlying village of the state,” McDermot assented. “ All the men will be here tomorrow for this religious festival, and should any one, Ishaq Khan for instance, care to fan the flame, it may, it probably would mean bloodshed before we could teach them sense.”

“ What is your idea, then ? ” asked Hamilton ; his thoughts ran on Marjorie, on regrets that he had allowed her to accompany him into this.

"Well," said McDermot slowly, "Ishaq Khan is no fool, that is what I am relying on more than anything else. He will not risk failure. Your presence at the fête to-morrow will at least show him that I am on the look-out for trouble, and he will know that with us forewarned is forearmed. If we can smooth over to-morrow, get the people away from the priests and home to their various occupations, then we can deal with the ringleaders. You see that, don't you?"

"Quite," agreed Hamilton; he stood up. "The watchword in the meanwhile then is, do and say nothing, I gather."

"That is so;" McDermot stood up likewise. "The whole station is dining with us to-night. I hope Mrs. Hamilton will not find it very boring."

As a matter of fact Marjorie was to look back on that dinner-party as one of the most exciting she had ever sat through. Without doubt the tension of her own nerves produced that effect, for though Jack and McDermot were more than careful to appear unconcerned before her, she knew, as only a woman can know, instinctively, that the men were facing trouble and glossing it over for her, the woman's, benefit. She herself would do nothing to undeceive them, therefore she chatted tennis and the Shillong season to young Donaldson, laughed at Dr. Brown's sarcasm, and listened smilingly to Miss Lyall's vague remarks as to the weather and the scholars of the mission school, feeling within herself as if all this light badinage and laughter were taking place on the edge of a volcano or some equally uncomfortable spot. She was certainly over-frightened and hysterical, for once or twice she caught herself comparing the silent bare footed men-

servants who waited at table to beasts of prey, creeping in circles ever nearer and nearer to those whom they would ultimately devour. For the rest, she was bound to admit that supposing all her fears were true the men of the party were singularly and cleverly light-hearted and careless about it. Only once did the conversation in any sort of a way touch upon what might be the real reason for the Commissioner of Police's visit to Bholpur. Young Donaldson set the ball a-rolling.

"Risaldar Khan tells me," he announced, helping himself to an orange from the dish in front of him, "that things are just bubbling in the bazaar over this festival to-morrow."

"If it is only a question of bubble," put in Lyall with his usual intense seriousness, "it is all right. For myself, I could wish to see such festivals put a stop to."

"Interfering with the liberty of the public, man," remonstrated Brown. "It is impossible."

"And is it only a question of bubble?" asked Mrs. Hamilton her question was addressed to young Donaldson, but her eyes sought for the answer in her husband's face.

"Bubble, not a bit of it," laughed Donaldson; he was a pleasant-faced, long-limbed specimen of the ordinary English youth. "But it is difficult to take their revolver practice and revolutionary announcements seriously. Ra Chandra's latest move is a bomb manufactory in the back garden; rum old fish, Ra Chandra."

McDermot caught Hamilton's eye and pushed back his chair.

"Shall we make a move out on to the verandah," he

suggested. "We men will accompany the ladies, with their permission, and bring our smokes with us."

"Good idea ;" Brown turned to Mrs. Hamilton. "As a rule, he said, "my life here consists of bed, breakfast, tennis, dinner and bed, with only McDermot and Donaldson's faces to lighten the gloom. You are a perfect god-send to me, Mrs. Hamilton."

Marjorie laughed, and the party moved into the verandah. The conversation did not again touch on dangerous ground, McDermot saw to that, and punctually at eleven little Miss Lyall rose to say good-night.

"We will meet to-morrow, I suppose," she said to Mrs. Hamilton. "You will be going, will you not, to watch the procession from Prince Ishaq Khan's pavilion ?"

"The wife hates those sort of shows," Hamilton put in. "I am going to persuade her to spend the day resting instead ; we had a long journey yesterday, and we have another one ahead of us."

"Oh, but," remonstrated Marjorie ; she slipped her hand into his arm as he stood beside her. "I am not a bit tired, and I am just going to see everything I can to-morrow. I am interested in this festival."

"We will see when to-morrow comes," argued Hamilton, man-like defeating his own ends in his eagerness to gain them, for Marjorie, even if she had not been quite sure before, was now absolutely certain that the trouble she felt in the air was to be centred in this festival he was so anxious to keep her away from.

She had her own way, as was but natural, and the next morning at 9.30 sat waiting for Jack and McDermot in the carriage that was to drive them to the palace. The day was glaringly hot, the sun blazing down on a

parched-up world of burned grass and dusty roads.

"It is almost a visit of state," explained McDermot as they started, which remark was by way of accounting for the splendidly attired out-riders who accompanied the carriage, two riding in front, two bringing up the rear.

The shamiana erected by Prince Ishaq Khan for the benefit of his guests stood on the raised plateau of the palace garden overlooking the bazaar. They were above the strenuous, noisy crowds ; and here, under the cool shadow of enormous trees, carpets had been spread and chairs arranged for every one's comfort. At the far end of the shamiana stood a low daïs on which was the Prince's throne ; here, after the European reception was over, he was to sit in state and receive the homage of the native crowd. For the present, so the Resident and his guests were informed, on their arrival, he was in retirement, for since a very early hour in the morning he had been assisting in the religious side of the festival. He hoped, however, so Muzfat impressed on them with a deferential smile, to be rested sufficiently to be able to come among them for half an hour before the durbar opened ; meanwhile, would they please look upon the palace and its servants as theirs.

"You see," said McDermot ; he drew Hamilton a little aside from the others. "Ishaq Khan won't see us ; he is very clever, Hamilton, he won't show his hand till the last moment."

"So it would appear," agreed Hamilton. He moved to the edge of the parapet and stood looking down on the seething mass of people underneath. The procession had just widened out to give room to a mad dancing figure, a holy man, coated from neck to heel in white

paint, filthy beyond description, mad with some vile drug. He pranced and capered and shouted, his long, matted grey hair streaming round him, the crowd watching his efforts with admiring eyes.

"They are a nasty crew," thought Hamilton, and at that moment his eye was caught by young Donaldson's figure on horseback in the crowd, slim, erect, white uniformed and businesslike. He pushed his horse here and there trying to diffuse some order to the throng, and the loathsome dancing figure came in for some sharp words and an order to move on—Donaldson being acutely aware that the man's presence could hardly be a pleasant object to the ladies in the pavilion. Hamilton, watching the little by-play from above, was vividly aware of the truth of McDermot's fears. Hate for the white man, hate, cowed but none the less palpitating and alive, was evident in the crowd's attitude towards the young policeman, and it was almost a pity, considering the inflammable material they were dealing with, that Donaldson should be so young, so eagerly efficient in his duties. Hamilton's eyes, even as the thought left his mind, were caught and held once more by a peculiarly arresting face in the crowd. A man, in the midst of the swaying, excited throng, stood stiff and unmoved, his eyes apparently fixed in an intent stare on the people in the shamiana. Hamilton voiced his thought aloud.

"Strange looking chap, that;" he nodded in the direction of the intent gazer and McDermot following his glance spoke quickly.

"It's Ra Chandra," he said; "funny you should have singled him out. It is the face of a fanatic, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Hamilton; once more his eyes met those

others strangely intent upon him from the crowd below.
“Your pet bomb maker, isn’t he, yet it is not a bad face on the whole.”

“It is not a bad man, either,” McDermot answered slowly, “but Brown is always certain he will do some damage one of these days.”

At half-past twelve punctually Ishaq Khan, splendid in all his robes of state, and with mace bearers in attendance, came out of the Palace and stood for a few minutes bowing in acknowledgment of the tumultuous welcome thrown him from the crowd below, then he turned to welcome his English guests.

As Hamilton had said during one of his arguments to persuade Marjorie to stay away from the function, “It will be very awkward for you to have to meet Ishaq Khan.” It was awkward, that she was bound to admit, but the embarrassment great as it was, lay all on her side. Prince Ishaq Khan’s face was untroubled, his smiling welcome unaltered ; she met his eyes, only for a second, they were blank, listless, almost as if he failed to recognize her. There was something very complete about his absolute ignoring of whatever memories might have lain between them. To Hamilton he was more than scrupulously polite ; his stay, so the Prince hoped, would extend at least over the week end ; Ishaq Khan would do himself the honour to arrange a shoot for Sunday. Hamilton smiled and shook his head ; he regretted urgent matters awaited his attention in Calcutta ; this was only a flying visit ; they would be off again to-morrow. Prince Ishaq Khan was truly grieved ; perhaps some other time ; he smiled slowly, and McDermot felt unreasonably irritated by that smile.

The shamiana was beginning to fill up, the better class natives of the town were being admitted to pay their homage. Muzfat was at the Prince's elbow with a whispered suggestion; the Prince agreed. Would his English guests accompany him to the daïs; chairs for them were provided behind the throne; they could watch the crowds; it might amuse them. McDermot, with one swift glance at Hamilton, accepted for the group, and still smiling, the Prince turned to lead the way.

Hamilton, as guest of honour, walked at his right hand, McDermot just behind with the ladies, Brown and Lyall bringing up the rear. The little procession, with Muzfat to announce their coming, moved slowly through the, by this time, fast filling shamiana. The embarrassment of the moment was still with Mrs. Hamilton; her checks were a little flushed, her thoughts a little agitated. On the whole though, it had not been quite so bad as she had anticipated; Ishaq-Khan, dressed in these long, flowing robes, was so much the native, so far removed from the English educated, Oxford trained man about town, that the memory which she carried of him from that scene in Shillong seemed almost absurd.

Still her thoughts were centred largely on that episode, and for that reason, because she had for the time being forgotten her fears of what to-day might bring forth, surprise more than any other feeling was uppermost in her mind when the procession came to rather an abrupt pause. Fear only took hold of her when she heard McDermot say a word sharply under his breath and step quickly before her. At the same moment Brown and Lyall moved forward instinctively, the three of them

forming a sort of rampart round the women. She could not see Jack, could not hear anything, for a strange silence seemed to have fallen over the crowd. Instinct told her to scream, to call his name; breeding, that something fine and strong that goes to the making of English men and women, held her silent with tight clenched hands. Eternity seemed in that pause; Miss Lyall gave a little, furtive cry, and leant against her brother, then, at last, through the stillness Marjorie heard Jack's voice clear and distinct.

"By Jove, a near thing, Prince. I have to thank you for your promptness."

And Ishaq Khan's reply, level and toneless. "I regret the need should have arisen, Hamilton. McDermot will tell you the man is an admitted fanatic but, so we imagined, not dangerous."

Then the clamour of comments and questions held for that pause in check found vent, and the air was full of native voices arguing and explaining. McDermot stepped aside; his comprehensive glance took in the rigid whiteness of Mrs. Hamilton's face.

"It's all right," he whispered to her; "thank God you didn't scream."

Marjorie hardly heard the badly worded compliment; her eyes were on Jack, and Jack meeting them came across to her.

"Well, Marjorie," he said looking down at her, "did it give you a shock? I am still very much alive despite the fellow's grudge against me."

Every nerve in her body fought for self control under his smile, and at last she could lift her eyes and smile back, only Jack was near enough to see how her lips

trembled. He patted her hand and still holding it in his, turned back to Ishaq Khan.

"We owe the Prince our thanks, Marjorie," he said ; "he fairly swung the fellow off me."

Then it was that Marjorie's eyes had time to take in the rest of the scene. Strongly held by four native policemen stood Ra Chandra, his whole form shaken with sobs, the large tears trickling down his face. The native crowd had drawn a little away from this group, but in the cleared space behind the prisoner a boy stood ; he was undoubtedly some relation for he bore a striking resemblance to the sobbing man but his face, as he held his ground bravely, blazed with indignation, and if he was quivering it was certainly from rage, not fear or sympathy. Opposite them stood Ishaq Khan watching the proceedings with contemptuous eyes. He answered Mrs. Hamilton's stammered words of thanks with a stiff bow.

"To this, more than to me, are thanks due," he commented ; with his foot he pushed the revolver that had fallen from Ra Chandra's hand. "Had this gone off the first or even the second time, Mrs. Hamilton, nothing could have saved your husband."

It seemed to Marjorie as if scorn rang in his words more than gladness ; her eyes went back to the pitiful figure of the would-be murderer ; for some strange reason here, where she ought to have hated, she felt only pity, and towards Ishaq Khan instead of gratitude, she felt hate and distrust.

Jack picked up the revolver with a smile. "Pretty obsolete, isn't it ?" he agreed. Then he turned to McDermot. "Your tame fanatic might be removed

mightn't he, McDermot, the poor fellow seems a bit sick of life."

The Resident nodded agreement, and at that moment Donaldson, the news of the excitement having just reached him, dashed in to take over affairs. He hurried off Ra Chandra under a strong escort for the sake of impressing the natives, though conscious himself of the incongruous spectacle they must present, armed law and order in all its power and glory and one miserable, sobbing criminal.

The durbar went on smoothly after that; the crowd paid its respects and dispersed silently. As McDermot had said Prince, Ishaq Khan had been too wise to throw in his lot with Ra Chandra, and his decisive action had settled once and for all the course of events. There would be no bloodshed in Bholpur yet awhile, no need for troops or rebellion. To-morrow the Police Commissioner's presence would be removed from amongst them, but he would carry away with him a shrewd idea of how iron a hand it was necessary to apply to the governing of Bholpur, and for the next few months at least sedition would have to hide her head. So much had Ra Chandra's action done for the cause.

Marjorie, perhaps, more than any one else, got near the truth of things that night as she and Jack talked over the events of the day. Much having been discussed and argued, Jack, man-like, was trying quite uselessly, to persuade his wife to take a lenient view of some one she disliked.

"Well, any way," he remonstrated for the twentieth time, "the fellow did save my life, Marjorie; doesn't that make him a little less black in your eyes?"

"I can't help it, Jack," answered Marjorie, her head, despite their many years of married life, was ridiculously near his shoulder. "It isn't all ingratitude. I know just as clearly as I know I love you, that the Prince wanted you to die even though he saved you, far more than the other man who tried to kill you."

And Jack had to be silent for McDermot, not more shrewdly but with greater knowledge, had put forward the same theory in his own private talk with Hamilton.

"The Prince saved you," he had admitted; "a fine action, Hamilton; it might have been too late, but it wasn't. If that revolver had not been obsolete I wonder what our chances of escaping alive would have been, all of us, I mean, not you alone. It missed fire twice, didn't it?"

Jack nodded. "We were all too taken aback to do anything for the moment," he explained.

"Yes," agreed McDermot; he stood up. "Poor old Ra Chandra," he rather inconsequently ended the discussion. "Another mad dreamer with a broken heart and smashed ideals."

Which only goes to prove that McDermot as well as Marjorie, though looking at it from a different point of view, had seen for a moment behind the veil of Ra Chandra's tragedy.

CHAPTER XIII

“ Between the heather and the sea,
It’s there I’d be.”

THERE is perhaps nothing in the wide world quite so beautiful as the heather-covered hills of Scotland. What can equal their soft purple distances, their bracken-covered slopes with the grey blue northern sky above them ? The singing, sun-flecked burns that greet one in their valleys or the wide calm stretches of lochs carry with them a beauty that brings tears to the eyes, for they call to the heart with that undefinable longing for the beauty of this world which so often escapes us. It would seem impossible to connect anything harsh and unlovable with landscapes such as these, yet many of such glens have been made hideous with the horror of wars, and men, in centuries past, have reddened the bracken and heather with their blood. She has been so well loved and well fought for, Scotland, perhaps all that goes to weigh in the scales with the love we give her to-day and makes her hills and glens so all beautiful in the eyes of every Scotchman.

The pity of it is that so many of Scotland’s most notably beautiful spots are marred by the busy tourist world which is conveyed hither and thither in noisy smoke-belching trains and steamboats. But away

within the fastness of her hills there are still a few little known havens of beauty where a motor-car would cause almost as much commotion as a comet.

Such a spot is Glen Doone, a small yet wide-scattered village, thirty miles from the nearest railway, consisting in all of the kirk, the minister's manse, the grocery establishment, and post office combined, and dotted on the hillside, the whitewashed cottages of farmer and labourer. The Hamiltons is the only big house in the neighbourhood, old Hamilton owning all the surrounding land, shooting and fishing. Not that the last two mentioned possessions were of much use to him. He was an old man, the laird, and it was a long time since he had attempted anything in the way of sport, but the property had been in the family for generations and the shooting and fishing were there and always to hand for Master Jack and Gerald on their periodical visits ; Milton, the gamekeeper saw to that.

The house, as the oldest villager remembered it and as it still remained, stood grey and square in a cut out plateau of the hillside. Not prepossessing to look at, but solid, well worn, comfortable. No trees stood near it, no creepers had ever attempted to cover the walls ; it was a large house with a surprising number of windows both back and front. At night, lighted and warm inside, it threw out a glow which could be seen from the far side of the glen. The villagers were strangely proud of that fact, the shepherds and such-like folk counting it a beacon and landmark of home. Behind the stables and gardener's cottage, to the rear of the house, the hillside sloped up and up, purple where the heather was in bloom, green where the bracken triumphed. Low stone walls

ran its length instead of hedges, cattle and sheep browsed there contentedly from year's end to year's end. In front of the house, beyond the pebble drive, the hill slope started again, and lawn after lawn fashioned to some sort of a garden—for here Mrs. Hamilton grew her roses and spent many happy mornings pottering in search of weeds—ran down to the burn's edge. A clear sparkling burn, with rowan trees dropping their wealth of berries into its waters and a stepping stone crossing which led to the path to kirk and post office.

Those stepping stones were a constant source of nerve trouble to Mrs. Hamilton, and more than once had she firmly threatened to give up going to church unless her husband would have a bridge built. The thought crossed her mind once more this afternoon as she stood on the top plateau and surveyed her garden. Gerald and his bride were arriving to-day, even now she was waiting for the carriage to bring them and the thought, the expectation had made her a little nervous. She had not been able to settle to any of her usual occupations all day, and the garden and burn had had less than their usual share of attention. Mrs. Hamilton possessed one of those curious natures always excessively busy yet never achieving anything. Time never hung heavy on her hands, yet her life since the boys had grown up and left home had been singularly void of any real occupation. Her gardening was always a source of pain and unnecessary work to the head gardener; Annie, the housekeeper, could have said the same of her mistress's household efforts, but they kept Mrs. Hamilton busy, cheerful, absolutely contented. She never opened a book, never thought, it is to be believed, of anything

outside the family, yet she was an astonishingly good, in a way very lovable woman. Of late years she had grown a little stout ; sometimes the fact distressed her, and when she remembered it she would make a point of walking twice a day to the post office instead of once ; her face, round and plump as a child's was almost unlined, just a little faded perhaps in colour, a little wrinkled round the bland blue eyes. Her hair as a girl had been very golden, now it was the colour of silver plate with the silver a little tarnished and she always did it in a plaited crown round her head. Her hands were the prettiest thing about Mrs. Hamilton, they were so soft, so white, so dimpled.

Her contemplation of the burn was only secondary, really her eyes were on the road beyond the kirk, and at the first sight of a little cloud of dust, heralding the arrival of the carriage, she turned and with little fluttering steps hurried into the house.

"John," she called, "John," her voice had a peculiarly childish note in it, "be quick, John, be quick, the carriage is just passing the manse."

She had to repeat her information twice before a door opened somewhere in the upper regions of the house.

"All right Betty, don't get excited," a somewhat cross voice answered. "I was looking for them myself out of the study window."

So much admitted he had to smile and as he joined his wife in the hall, he patted the agitated hands held out to him.

"There, there," he said, "you always did work yourself into a fuss over the lad Gerald. He is not worth half of Jack to my mind."

Standing by his plump, young-looking wife, John Hamilton appeared out of proportion tall and lank. Rather forbidding, grave thin face, but if the mouth was hard-set with faint lines of ill-temper about it, the eyes spoke truer for the man, great-hearted, if perhaps a little impatient of other people's failings.

Betty Hamilton at his last remark raised eyes well nigh flooded with tears.

"Oh, John," she remonstrated, "and Gerald the baby too."

"A baby grown up enough to take a wife it seems," her husband reminded her.

Further discussion between them was stopped, because with a loud sound on the pebble drive the Hamiltons' stately equipage rolled up to the front door, and quite before the pompous footman had attempted to descend even, Gerald had flung out and up the steps.

"Well, mother," he gasped, choking the plump little woman in a terrific hug, "Hullo, dad."

It was only right he should be so eager, so glad to be back with them; yet for that second, while she sat back in the corner of the carriage, Esther had a horrible sensation of being out of it, a stranger in a strange land. The next moment, all laughter and bubbling talk, Gerald was back again, handing her from the carriage, and she was shaking hands first with a tall stern-faced man, then with a little stout lady who put up timid arms and rather ineffectually kissed her.

"My word, lassies but she is bonnie," Annie remarked afterwards as with arms akimbo she stood and re-acted for the cook, who had unavoidably been absent, the meeting in the hall. "She is like nobody I have

ever seen, all pink and white and the gold hair of her!"

"More so than the mistress herself when she came here first?" asked the cook; cook was apt to be sceptical as to Annie's opinion on most things.

"I should think so," retorted that worthy, "I saw it just now, all free over her shoulders, when I took the hot water in, it's, well it's like living sunlight."

To such flights of fancy cook could say nothing; she took refuge in a snort; Annie had carried the day for the time being, but cook reserved her opinion.

Upstairs in the large airy guest chamber, Esther paused in the process of putting up the said living sunshine and strayed from the front of the glass to look out of the wide window fronting on to lawns and burn. The running water carried no special message of cheerfulness to her heart, the dim distance of hills and glens made her shiver, their loneliness and stillness infected her if anything unpleasantly. Gerald, bursting into the room five minutes later, all glowing from his bath, found her still gazing out of the window with disconsolate eyes. He crossed over to her and putting his arm round her stooped to bury his face in the masses of her hair. Sometimes he thought he loved that gold hair of hers better than anything else in the world.

"Well, wife of mine," he asked presently, "this is the old home, how does it strike you?"

"I don't quite know," answered Esther; she moved a little away from him. Generally she took all his affection very impassively, and so far he had quite failed to note that she never returned it. "It seems lonely, and"—she paused for a word, "dull," she ended then flushed

quickly, as she realized the remark would probably hurt him. "But it is beautiful," she ended softly.

Gerald did not hear the conclusion of her sentence; he was hurt at her words and he was trying at the same time to see her point of view. The effort brought a little perplexity to his heart; once or twice since their marriage he had found it a little hard to understand Esther, her outlook on things was so different to his. On this occasion, for instance, he could not have imagined anything or any place being dull so long as Esther was with him; he had to push that thought aside in answering her.

"It will be dull for you, darling," he admitted, drawing her close into his arms again, "but we won't stay long, just a fortnight, the old people will expect that, then we will go back to London and put in a real good month amusing ourselves. And, dearest, there is heaps to show you and interest you in up here—all my old haunts; we will take a day or two's fishing, shall we, just you and I?" his eyes were eager on her face. "The mater will love you, and the dad is a brick though you probably won't see much of him, and I—I, Esther," he drew her with him to the window seat and sitting himself, pulled her gently down beside him. "I have thought and planned and hoped to bring you here ever since I first met you. I love the place, you see, thbse hills, that wind which seems always full of the scent of the heather. I hoped you would love them too, that they would take strong hold on you. Am I being a sentimental fool?" Suddenly he slipped to his knees beside her, laying his cheek to the cool freshness of her hands. "I hoped they would help you to forget that other fellow," he whispered in rather a

jerky sentence, and though he did not lift his eyes to look at her, he was conscious that her whole body stiffened at his words.

' The subject had not been mentioned since their marriage, but thoughts are hard to kill, and once or twice he had wondered.

Esther did not speak for a minute or two, then she moved her hands away slowly and stood up.

" We shall be late for dinner, if we don't hurry," was what she said, and went back to the dressing-table.

Gerald followed her; having gone so far she could hardly leave the question there.

" Esther," he said, catching at her hands, forcing him to face her, " you must answer me. Are you still thinking of him after all that has passed ? "

Esther's eyes met his steadily, the habitual mask of reserve was over her face. " I am trying, Gerald," she answered ; " don't make things too hard for me."

" But," he broke off sharply and turned back to the window, hands clenched at his sides. " My God, it is too awful, to think that you "—that was what hurt him most that she should have pretended all this time, asking for all his love and giving nothing in exchange.

Esther watched his back ; she wished now that she had hidden more of the truth from him, but his words, coming on the top of a tiring journey, and a feeling of depression, had touched her too much on the raw. Still it was evidently no use trying to explain the state of things to him ; it would only make him miserable and not help her much.

" Gerald," she called softly and he turned at once to her, his face white, the laughter wiped from his eyes.

"Dear boy," she said, and she moved slowly to him, "does it make you love me any less, are you going to fail me just perhaps when I need you most?"

She stood in front of him and her eyes were marvellous. Gerald took a deep breath, his arms were aching to hold her again, but he kept them firmly to his sides.

"No," he answered a trifle unsteadily, "it's all right, dear, I shan't fail you, only I thought—however I was always a bit of a fool at thinking." He moved restlessly away from her to the door. "Better be getting on with your dressing," he ended, "I'll go down and keep pater company till you are ready."

Dinner—the fact was noticeable to all save Mrs. Hamilton—was somewhat of a forcedly cheerful meal. Gerald was a little too eager to appear radiantly happy, Esther was as usual very silent. There was not much in that to cause surprise, the girl was probably shy, only John Hamilton caught himself once or twice searching for some other reason to account for it. He was not absolutely certain that he liked the girl, though that fact he was quite prepared to keep to himself, and he gathered quite early in the meal that though Gerald loved the very air she breathed, she had palpably no particular feeling for Gerald. In a way he was sorry for his son.

Mrs. Hamilton, the only one of the party serenely happy, sat at the head of the table, her chair a little pulled aside from the place that had been laid for her so that she could continually put out a hand and touch Gerald. He was her baby, would always in her eyes be a baby; she insisted upon his eating far larger helpings of his favourite dishes than she apportioned to the other

two, and kept an anxious eye on the cream in case there should not be a sufficient quantity left for him. She had always held with making the boys eat ; if she had done very little for their brains or morals in the far back school days, she had at least always seen that their little insides were full, and she had given them a love unmeasurable, unchangeable, blind and absolutely trusting. For the rest they had shaped themselves, with John Hamilton to see to it that the shaping should be clean and upright.

One uneasy twinge in the course of the evening however, Mrs. Hamilton did have, but not till late that night as she lay in her bed thinking over the events of the day, did the conviction of what it might mean, grow on her. Then she woke the slumbering John to inform him of the astounding, not to be credited idea.

"She seems a little cold, dear ; did you notice it ?" she asked. John was luckily a light sleeper and easily roused. "I can only hope she loves the dear boy ; sometimes those very pretty girls—" the suggestion ended in a sigh ; she longed for John to contradict her, but he didn't.

"There is a French proverb" he reminded her instead, "which answers your problem for you. Gerald is palpably very much in love with the young lady ; perhaps he sometimes makes himself a little tiresome."

"John!" In the darkness Mrs. Hamilton could feel the shocked red creep to her cheeks. She blushed very easily, Mrs. Hamilton ; love, for instance, was a word that often caused her uneasiness—there was a lot about love that was just a little immodest.

Her husband chuckled at her shocked exclamation,

and turned on his side, preparatory to another seeking of slumber.

" You used to get a bit bored with me," was his parting shot, and one which Mrs. Hamilton was fair^f to treat with a stiff silence.

CHAPTER XIV

"Hush, on my lips I feel a ghostly kiss—
I have forgotten!—oh, I lied, I lied."

LIFE at the Grey House was dull, much duller than Esther had ever even dreaded or than Gerald had any idea of. For himself, that first evening of disillusionment having been effaced—and Esther was at some pains to entirely wipe the memory of her words from his mind—he was completely in his element and thoroughly enjoying himself. Every day, after what he would have described as a top hole breakfast, he would sally forth in his oldest, most comfortable clothes, with gun or fishing rod over his shoulder and a packet of sandwiches in his pocket, and tramp and slaughter for long happy days with the sun tanning his face and the wind blowing the mists of doubt and uneasiness from his mind. Then home to late tea--such a tea laid out in the billiard-room!—hot scones and tea cakes such as only the Hamiltons' cook could make, butter and heather-tasting honey. In the cool of the evening he would laze about, or take Esther for a stroll through the wood that ran parallel to the burn, or perhaps they would potter about among the roses of Mrs. Hamilton's walled-in garden.

He laid the whole of his clean life and heart bare before Esther in those days, and every telling, every shame-faced

pause—because she was too good to hear such things—pushed Esther further and further from him so it seemed to her. She never spoke of her own life, of her people, but that hardly mattered to him, for man-like, he was singularly incurious as to the years in which he had not known her. It mattered, however, more than a little to Mrs. Hamilton. Mrs. Hamilton had been prepared to love Esther, did love her in fact since the girl was Gerald's wife, only she found it a little difficult to talk to her new daughter-in-law, and instinct more than any wisdom led her to know that it was Esther's reserve that stood like a stone wall between them and any intimacy.

Once she did attempt to break down this barrier; they had on that occasion got a little nearer to each other than usual. Mrs. Hamilton after a busy fruitless two hours spent in housekeeping, had sought out her guest and found Esther in the drawing-room sitting on the floor, the large family album in her lap. There were pictures in it of Mrs. Hamilton as a girl, as a bride, as a wife, one of her as a young mother; and after that—emblematical of Mrs. Hamilton's life almost—the book consisted solely and entirely of Jack and Gerald. In long clothes, in shorts, in sailor suits, in kilts, as babies, as schoolboys, as young men. Mrs. Hamilton had a tale for nearly every picture and in the telling she lost her sense of shyness with the girl, felt she was closer to her than she had ever been before. It was a good opportunity; with the book on her lap open at the only picture of herself with her eldest as a very wee baby, Mrs. Hamilton lifted her soft blue eyes to Esther's face.

“And your own mother?” she asked; “tell me of her,

dear ; you have lost her, haven't you, but she would be very proud of you if she could see you now."

The girl's face hardened ; Mrs. Hamilton would not have been able to define it as such ; she only felt herself growing a little pink, as if she had inadvertently touched on something unpleasant.

" Yes, she is dead," Esther answered ; she rose from the floor ; her voice had been cold to start with, now some unexplainable heat flamed into it. " I don't know if she was proud of me or not, anyway she loved me."

It was almost as if she was speaking in defence against some accuser.

Mrs. Hamilton rose too, laying aside the book.

" If she was your mother, of course she loved you." She put her beautiful little hands on the girl's. " I have always thought that is what the word—mother—must mean, just love."

" Does it ? " asked Esther. " Anyway I would rather not talk of her," she went on abruptly ; " there is nothing to tell."

" I quite understand, dear," agreed Mrs. Hamilton, though that was hardly truthful. " Perhaps I ought not to have asked you, only I love Gerald so much and I am learning to love you as Gerald's wife, it is not strange I should be a little curious. is it ? "

" Gerald married me without finding out much about me, you mean ? " asked the girl ; she seemed oddly on the defensive.

" Oh no, indeed no," interposed Mrs. Hamilton not without dignity, " he loves you and you love him ; for us there could hardly be anything else to find out."

" You trust him as much as all that ? " queried Esther.

"Don't you, my dear?" answered Mrs. Hamilton.

There the conversation dropped and never again did Mrs. Hamilton return to it. To her husband she certainly expressed some of her thoughts and he, seeing further perhaps than she did, concluded that here no doubt was reason enough for the girl's habitual silence and reserve. It struck him as more than a little probable that Gerald had been too foolishly in love to find out things; still the marriage having been accomplished, the only thing to do was to make the best of it. He was very nice to Esther after that, for he saw how dull the days were to her, and guessed how difficult it must be for her to amalgamate with Mrs. Hamilton.

But even he failed to see quite all that that fortnight did to Esther's character. There are some natures to whom excitement, the joy of new sensations, are almost essential. She had nothing to occupy herself with in those long days while Gerald fished or shot, nothing to think of or plan over except thoughts that she hardly dared to look at, memories of one moment in her life when the whole world had swayed to the pleading of a man's evil passion. And so it came about that instead of loosening the chains as Gerald had planned to do this fortnight merely strengthened and strained them. She was longing passionately, before the end of their visit, for India again, for a glaring hot sun on dusty palm trees, for vivid blue skies, for the colour of the goldmohar, the scent of the moghra blossoms. Some hand was playing on her heart strings making them throb to the faint-heard call of the tom-toms.

And all this, as was only to be expected, Gerald did not see. If Esther seemed a little silent, a little unmoved

by all his worship, well she had always been that, she had never in any sense of the word been a demonstrative woman. It was sufficient for him that twice of her own free will had she turned to him ; things were working out all right he had no doubt ; one day she would really love him, and that was worth waiting for. Meanwhile he was occasionally a little concerned with the fact that Mrs. Hamilton and Esther did not appear to have very much in common. He ventured on the matter once, as he and Esther took their evening stroll through the woods. They had come to a clearing at the edge of the burn, and Gerald had found a nice flat stone for Esther to sit on with an adjacent tree for her to lean her back against. He himself was stretched full length on the ground at her feet and they had stayed silent for so long that an inquisitive white-tailed rabbit emerged from his retreat to inspect them. It was off, however, like a flash of lightning as Gerald lifted his head to look at it.

"Rum little devils, aren't they, Esther ?" Gerald remarked; he drew himself up to a sitting position throwing one arm across her lap and leaning against her. "I expect he thought we were both asleep. As a matter of fact I have been thinking."

So had Esther ; the shadow of her thoughts still lay across her eyes as she looked at him.

"Have you," she asked.

"Yes ;" Gerald paused a second and bent his attention on extracting a pine needle from his sock. "What is up with you and the mater ?" he asked suddenly, lifting his eyes to Esther's face. "She seems somehow shy with you. I have never known the mater that before."

"Perhaps," suggested Esther, "she does not like me, there is no particular reason why she should."

"Rubbish," asserted Gerald; "she would love you just because you are mine," he asserted quite frankly.

"Yes," agreed Esther, "at least I think she would try to;" she paused a second, her eyes looked beyond Gerald's head to where the Grey House showed through the trees. "Gerald," she broke the silence, "do you know that all this time, both before and since our marriage, you have never asked me anything about myself," her voice dropped a little, "about my people, didn't it mean anything to you?"

Gerald looked up in surprise. "I suppose I haven't," he admitted, "but why should I? I knew I loved you, that was about all. Have you been thinking it was a bit heartless of me? Somehow you know I don't care to think of all those years in which I didn't know you, that is probably why I never asked. And Mrs. Bullock told me about your people being dead; were you awfully fond of them?" he asked, a little jealousy sounded behind the question.

Esther stood up. "I don't think," she spoke slowly, "that it is in me to be awfully fond of any one, Gerald; but some day, if you care to hear, I will tell you about my mother."

"Why that is nonsense, sweetheart," Gerald laughed, getting to his feet and putting his arms round her. "You are always wronging yourself by statements of that sort. I know you better than you know yourself."

"Do you?" asked Esther; she turned in his arms and faced him, her eyes serious. "One of these days I may

fall from your high ideal of me altogether ; will it hurt you very much, Gerald ? ”

“ If you did,” said Gerald, “ yes, but you won’t. I am not the least afraid of the threat.”

Then they went back to the house hand-in-hand like a couple of children, and Mrs. Hamilton watching from her bedroom window felt that after all she was perhaps being unjust to the girl ; if only she loved Gerald and made the dear boy happy what did her antecedents matter ?

That was the last evening of the young couple’s stay at the Grey House, and in honour of the occasion the minister, his wife and three daughters were bidden to dinner. It was a great event to them, and something of an affair to Mrs. Hamilton. If Annie had not been in the family a great many years she would have been completely bewildered by the various muddled orders and counter orders she received in the course of the afternoon. At a quarter to seven, rather agitated with her efforts, Mrs. Hamilton retired to dress and all the guests had been assembled in the drawing-room for quite twenty minutes before she was ready to appear. Unpunctuality, through sheer lack of purpose, was a fixed habit of Mrs. Hamilton’s, and one in no small measure responsible for the lines of irritability round John Hamilton’s mouth.

Gerald, fully recognising the symptoms of his father’s frowning and constant glance at the clock, did his best to gloss over matters by an animated flow of conversation to the three Miss Macdonalds. He had in passed days of boyhood had a not more than usually fleeting affection for the second, who sat now between her two sisters rigidly alike in dress and deportment. All three were

clothed in white very modestly, by which Mrs. Macdonald meant bulkily, their three faces were equally pink and white, their features not obtrusive, their fair hair unbecomingly strained back to the nape of their necks. They had honest patient eyes, from which no amount of unbecoming dressing could remove the youth, and they all three stared intently at Esther. And if the second Miss Macdonald's pillow was wet with tears that night, there was no bewilderment behind the sorrow; Gerald had always been somewhat of a god to her, what more natural than that he should wed with a goddess.

After a quarter of an hour's wait Gerald suggested in a whispered aside to Esther that she might possibly be able to hasten matters upstairs. The success of her mission she rather doubted, but she was glad enough to go if only to get away for a little from the too complimentary stares of the Miss Macdonalds. Mr. Macdonald she had taken a sudden passionate aversion to; he had red badly brushed hair, and lacked a great many of his front teeth. He would eat his food disgustingly, she felt sure, and the thought gave her a shiver of aversion.

Her presence, as she had quite rightly guessed, was if anything rather a hindrance to the completion of Mrs. Hamilton's dressing, for a flow of explanations was the immediate result. However the end was achieved and still agitated and, by now slightly warm, Mrs. Hamilton took her new daughter-in-law's arm and descended to the drawing-room.

Esther as she walked into the dining-room with the two younger Macdonalds, Gerald escorting the eldest, whilst Mr. Hamilton piloted the minister's wife, could

hear Mrs. Hamilton deep in intricate apologies as to her lateness. These occupied a large share of the dinner hour, Mrs. Hamilton and her partner being the only two who conversed at all, though Gerald put in an effort manfully now and again.

After dinner, while the ladies waited for the men in the drawing-room, Mrs. Hamilton and the four Macdonalds went over, for without doubt the hundredth time, the family album, while Esther moved over to the window. The blinds had not been drawn ; outside it was still light, the burn shone like a little thread of white, the glen looked far away and mysterious in a mid-summer heat mist. Dinner had been just as awful as she had dreaded, for Mr. Macdonald had sat opposite her, and the slow champing of his toothless mouth had been a horrible fascination for her. She found herself now biting her lips, struggling with a wild desire to scream, to fly from the room, to get away from all these deadly, good, kindly people.

When the men came in, there was a little break up in the group over the album, the eldest Miss Macdonald sang, the youngest played, their performance was repeated several times. Then Gerald sang, one or two camp songs to Miss Macdonald's accompaniment, each effort greeted with a round of rapturous, if rather timidly expressed applause.

John Hamilton joined Esther in the window seat. His own bad temper had evaporated, and he was quick to see that something out of the ordinary had upset her usual restraint. He had from the beginning found her face with its unreadable eyes an interesting study ; tonight the mask of polite indifference was gone, the girl

was nervous, hysterical he thought, so he said nothing only by his presence shielded her from the rest of the room.

"Here's a cheerful looking ditty," Gerald remarked selecting a song from amongst the rest; "haven't sung it for years; shall we have a shot at it?"

"Is it one of those Indian Love Lyrics?" inquired Mrs. Hamilton; "they are very wonderful," she explained to attentive Mr. Macdonald, "and Gerald sings them beautifully."

A chorus of assent had greeted Gerald's suggestion and Miss Macdonald had commenced to bravely struggle with the opening chords of the accompaniment to "Less than the Dust" when Esther leant suddenly across to Mr. Hamilton.

"Don't let him sing that," she said; for the first time Mr. Hamilton thought he saw really into her eyes, they were wide and frightened. "I can't bear it, I really can't, not to-night."

He could see her hands closing and unclosing in her lap and stood up abruptly.

"There is a vote in this corner against that song, Gerald, my boy," he said casually, and he strolled across to the piano laying his hand on the singer's shoulder. "Esther doesn't like it."

"Doesn't she, by Jove!" Gerald turned quickly to the window, all contrition. "Then of course we won't have it. Didn't know you had ever heard me sing it, Esther."

He went across the room to her while Mr. Hamilton tactfully intervened with a suggestion that Miss Vera might play, since she was at the piano, his favourite piece, "In the Shadows."

"I have never heard you sing it," Esther admitted to Gerald; she put her hand on his arm, "but I know the song, and to-night somehow I couldn't bear it." He could see her lips quivering.

"What is up, old lady, are you feeling ill?" he asked covering her hand with his.

Esther nodded. "Could I slip away?" she asked; "would they think it rude? It isn't anything really, only I feel stupid and giddy."

"Hang what they think," answered Gerald; "I will make our excuses, and come myself at once."

"No, please," whispered Esther; she let him take her to the foot of the stairs. "In the Shadows" was just drawing to a close. "I would rather be alone for a little; you stay! I shall be quite all right."

Gerald went back dutifully, but as might have been expected the party did not last long after that. The Macdonalds practically tiptoed away with hushed voices, and full of sympathy John Hamilton volunteered to see them to the burn crossing, though that was really Gerald's duty, leaving the mother and son alone in the hall.

Gerald's face was anxious.

"I hope she isn't going to be ill, mother," he said as he bent to kiss the old lady.

"No dear, of course she isn't," comforted Mrs. Hamilton. She waited a minute and blushed, which was lost on Gerald, then she stood on tiptoe and ventured to impart a surprising suggestion to her son's ear.

His whole face cleared like magic, the eyes laughed then softened marvellously.

"By Jove!" he said, "do you think it can be that, mother?"

Without waiting for her answer, he turned and bounded up the stairs two at a time. Outside their door he paused though, and turning the handle very softly entered on tiptoe. Esther was in bed, her hair, the golden hair he loved so much, spread round her, he could hardly see her face for she lay low in the pillow, but apparently she was asleep for she made no sign as he knelt beside her.

The love in his heart was so great that it shook him almost to tears ; with something not unlike a sob he buried his face, his lips just touching her white arm where it lay free from the frills of her nightgown. Esther turned in her half sleep with some little murmured words, and for the moment he was afraid that he had carelessly wakened her, but she made no other sign, and he rose presently and went into his dressing-room. He had not caught the whisper from her sleep, if he had perhaps he would not have understood it.

"The little drum," she had said, "some one is playing on it, the little native drum."

CHAPTER XV

"Love must be largely taken for
better—or for worse."

GERALD voiced his mother's suggested hope to Esther after they had been about a fortnight in London. Some unexplainable shyness had kept him silent upon the subject till then, but that evening Esther had herself owned to being tired and fagged out, and instead of dressing up and doing a dinner and theatre somewhere, they had dined quietly in their own rooms, and afterwards had taken two chairs out into the little balcony that ran in front of their rooms. Gerald had smoked and read the evening paper while the light lasted, and Esther had sat silent and dreaming beside him, her hands idle on her lap. She had changed into a soft, loose tea gown, and taken her hair down, for her head ached and she had plaited it in one long, golden plait, that lay over her shoulder. She looked very young, Gerald, gazing up from his newspaper, thought, and he was struck with a wave of contrition at what she might have to go through in the near future. Then it was he spoke of what his mother had told him, stammering a little as he tried to make himself clear. It was met with an instant and positive denial.

"I don't mean to have children," Esther added; her face on the sudden had stiffened, grown older.

"Don't mean to have children!" Gerald echoed;

he made no attempt to keep the surprise out of his voice.

"No," said Esther ; her hands suddenly clenched, she sat forward a little. "To me it would be repulsive ; I hate the idea, sometimes I think I hate babies. Oh," she turned swiftly to him, "I am shocking you, I suppose ; you will not understand, but to me it is physically repulsive. When I meet a woman like that in the streets or anywhere," her voice dropped, "I feel sick, just sick."

Gerald could see her shiver ; he did not in the least understand her ; therein she was right, but he was not shocked, only moved to a quick intense tenderness for her.

"You would not feel like that to one of your own," was all he said.

"Yes, I should," said Esther ; she sat up in her chair, her hands tightly clenched together. "I will try and explain, if you care to hear. The feeling dates from a day in my life when I was about seventeen. I had a funny childhood, Gerald, very much alone, growing up on my own, and taking care of myself from as far back as I can remember. Mother was always there, but a shadowy person, I saw very little of her ; she liked me best when I kept quiet and out of the way. I soon grew to know that. I had strange ideas in those far back days ; I suppose my knowledge was gathered in a peculiar manner and I knew no other girls to talk to, you must remember. For instance, I thought—oh for many years—that babies were a punishment sent by God to those who were wicked. I used to pray at nights, 'God, I have been bad but please don't send me a baby.'"

She paused a second ; Gerald lent across and put his hand on hers ; she let it stay there.

"Then, one day," she went on more slowly, "it was when I was just seventeen, some one took me aside and told me about life, about men and women," she explained gravely, and for a second she turned and looked at Gerald. "They opened my eyes, took away my dreams, the world as I had imagined it to be lay round me like a broken picture. I could see no beauty in anything after that; it was hateful, all hateful." She rose, quickly moving a little away from him. "And woman was the most hateful thing among the rest," she ended, dropping her voice so that he hardly heard.

Gerald rose and followed her, but he did not attempt to touch her.

"Poor little girl," he said softly.

Esther turned, clinging to him impetuously; he could feel her slight form shivering in his arms.

"You won't ever ask me to have a baby, will you, Gerald?" she pleaded; "I couldn't, really I couldn't. If I thought it was going to happen," she drew a little away from him and her eyes narrowed, "I should kill myself rather than go through with it."

Gerald frowned slightly; he thought she was being hysterical, and sometimes he was afraid that Esther was going to develop into an hysterical woman, the one thing on the whole earth that he most disliked. Therefore he tried to make his voice extra cheerful and sensible as he answered.

"Of course, darling," he said, "things shall be always as you wish, only I think when you have had time to look at things sensibly you will see it in a different light. It is not really horrid or repulsive, dear heart, it is just that at present you have got at life from the wrong standpoint.

I didn't know before that girls thought of things in that light, but when you come to think of it I suppose it is not unnatural that they should. Something wrong in the system of bringing them up, seems to me."

A most philosophical remark for Gerald. Then he drew her close to him again and bent to kiss her.

"After all," he whispered, his face close against hers, "you have learnt not to hate me, dear, haven't you? Don't you think the rest will come?"

"No," answered Esther passionately. "No." Then she drew away from him and went back to her chair. "Perhaps I was meant to be a bad woman," she said, forcing herself to speak calmly; "sometimes I feel like one, and as if your goodness, yours ideas of me, would stifle me, choke me with their virtue."

"For God's sake," said Gerald—she was straining his temper just a little, because at the back of his heart was his own disappointment of which she had taken no thought,—"don't say those kind of things, Esther; you don't know what you are talking about and it's hateful."

"Don't I?" flamed Esther; suddenly she was angry, angry against him, against his bland knowledge and trust in her. She wanted to hurt him at that moment, wanted passionately to see him wince away from the knowledge of her life. She chose the readiest weapon to her hand.

"Do you remember, Gerald, that woman last night in the crowd as we came out of Daly's theatre. The woman with the atrocious hat, the golden hair, the flaming scarlet lips?"

Gerald did remember and flushed hotly; he had been excessively annoyed at the time because the woman had

stared most offensively at Esther, and he had so hated to think that Esther should be called on to see such a person at all.

"What on earth has she got to do with the discussion?" he asked. "Let's drop it, Esther."

His voice softened ; he was very much in love with her ; he did not like to think how near he had been to quarrelling with her.

But Esther's anger once roused had lesser forces to quell it ; she stood up again and her voice was steady and a little contemptuous.

"She has a lot to do with it," she said ; "she stared at me because she recognized me, that's all. She was a friend of my mother's. We, my mother and I, were of her class, you see. That wakes you," she went on passionately, "doesn't it? Now at last you know how vile a thing it is you have married."

The full sense of her words hardly reached his brain, yet he tried to stop her. "Esther," he said dully, "Esther."

Esther's anger broke ; the thing once out, she was sorry for it.

"Why did you make me tell you?" she said ; "I never meant to, but you have always been so sure of me, so certain I was all you imagined. Sometimes I could have screamed it at you, yet I have always managed to keep it back, and now you must hear it all. Mother died four years ago," she went on speaking in a dull, quiet voice. "Died, as my aunt I suppose did not tell you, practically in the gutter of some slum here in London. We had no money ; for years"— her voice broke a little—"we had been living a life such as you have never even touched

on the outskirts of. Then she died, but before that she had written to her sister, my aunt, who was out in India, begging her to come home and take compassion on me. As mother was dying she told me of her plan ; she wanted me to have my chance, she said, the only good thing she had been able to give me in my life. After she was dead aunt came and took me away ; I needn't tell you about all that, need I ? I went out to India and I met you." Her voice dropped, he could hardly hear her words. " You were my chance," she whispered. " I—I—" Suddenly her voice broke in a sob ; she put up her hands to her face and turned blindly to go indoors.

Gerald was beside her in a second ; he could not find anything to say but he took her two hands in his and as Esther met his eyes she knew to the full how successful she had been in hurting him. The knowledge made her ashamed, more ashamed than she had ever felt in her life, and she lowered her eyes quickly.

" It is true what I have said, Gerald, but not all of it. I was trying to hurt you ; I am not good, but I have never, never been bad in that way."

" Dear, I knew that," Gerald answered. " I knew it the moment you had spoken." He waited a minute before going on ; Esther could feel his hands tightening on hers. " It wouldn't have made any difference before if you had told me ; it makes no difference now ; you believe that, don't you, Esther ? "

It was such a surprising way for him to take it, that Esther lifted her eyes.

" You are good," she whispered, and at that moment she was nearer to loving him than she had ever been before.

"No, I am not particularly good," smiled Gerald ; he was beginning to win back to the safe ground of common sense. "I am a man ; and I love you ; after all love wouldn't be of much worth if it couldn't stand by you through thick and thin. So the matter drops there, doesn't it, Esther ? I, at any rate, will never allude to it again." He let go her hands and bethought himself suddenly of a pipe, an ever present help in time of trouble and just the thing he wanted to soothe his ruffled nerves.

Esther watched him cross to the table, find his pipe, fill it and light it ; her eyes were full of strange wonder and something, softer, gentler than their usual expression. Gerald, his pipe well under weigh, glanced across at her.

"You move off into bed, old lady," he said, "you are dead tired ; I'll finish my pipe and come in later."

Esther turned into the room and began her undressing ; half way through though she crossed slowly over to the window and looked out at Gerald. She could see the top of his head, the glow from his pipe, one hand as it rested on the table. Swiftly and noiselessly, gathering her petticoats round her, she slipped out and across the space to him. He did not realize her presence, because he was very deep in a somewhat sharp tussle with his own thoughts, until he felt her cool soft cheek on his hand, her hair brushing against his face.

"Gerald," she whispered, "thank you, and words like that sound cold and stupid from me to you, but I wanted to tell you that if I could have a son who would grow into a man like you, I should not hate it, I think I should be proud, and wonderfully happy."

Then she had vanished back before he could turn and hold her and he sat on in the dark long after his pipe had gone out, his heart full of a strange and wonderful new hope.

CHAPTER XVI

“ Not law, not duty, nor the warning voice
 Of saint or angel keeps Love’s compass true.”

LOVE is probably—in the realms of romance it is admittedly—the greatest force in the world. It can perform miracles and move mountains, metaphorically speaking, yet it is practically powerless to alter natures. That is to say that a great love may idealize to the heart of the lover, the form and character of the beloved—it will blind him to her imperfections, dazzle him with her otherwise undetected charms—but it will in no sort of way change her in any one else’s eyes except his own. In fact love can work all miracles in the nature of the one who loves, but it has little or no effect upon the one beloved. So with Esther; though the sudden rush of feeling and self-abasement which she experienced towards Gerald on that evening of explanation was undoubtedly genuine in bringing her nearer to loving him than she had ever been before, it lacked the vital force behind it. She did not, could not, so fate willed it, really love him, and apart from love she could not possibly have found a character less in sympathy with her own than his.

He was forever, and mercifully for himself, quite unwittingly, irritating her—the very placidity and

evenness of his nature drove her sometimes to the verge of hysterics. She had the same feeling of intolerance towards him that one gets towards a dog who, all desirous of pleasing you, is yet quite incapable of understanding what you want. They had, as may be imagined, no tastes in common ; Gerald indeed was not difficult to please—he had the healthy, typical outlook upon life common to most men in the Service. He took a keen interest in games of every sort, had something that almost amounted to a passion for horses and dogs, liked theatres—musical comedies for preference, though he was quite willing to be good-humouredly bored at any sort of show—and he had very few and very modest opinions ; but the one or two which he did possess he could admit of no argument over. He was not very keen—he would have described it thus himself—on reading, and he had an innate horror of sitting still doing nothing, therefore as was but natural life in London proved slightly irksome to him ; not that he ever voiced or thought of it as such, only he undoubtedly had a good deal of spare time which he unknowingly spent in getting on Esther's nerves.

Yet on the whole that fortnight was the happiest time they had had since their marriage. Esther did try, to begin with, the fervour of gratitude being strong on her, to enter a little more into companionship with Gerald ; she was outwardly at least more affectionate and he, so pleased with outward signs, was fain to imagine that he had at last entered into his kingdom of her love. It rendered him, one may be sure of that, blissfully happy ; so much should be entered to Esther's credit.

They spent a month in town doing, as Gerald

phrased it, the thing thoroughly while they were about it. At first as he had sat smoking his pipe on the verandah that evening he had been tempted to give up the idea of theatres and such like things and go right away into the country, just he and Esther alone; but level common sense of which he had such a large share seemed against so much recognition of an unpleasant fact, and in the end he decided to leave things as they had at first arranged. Let them go on as if nothing had happened; what Esther had told him should be as if it had never been; he wiped the memory of it clean from his mind, only sometimes he would catch himself wondering, and turning to look at the delicate outline of her face beside him as their taxi would draw up at this, or that theatre door, and the stream of passers-by on the pavement would reveal for a moment, some tawdry outcast drifting on her way with painted heavy eyes and set smile, and the wonder always brought it with a throb of pain to think that Esther's life should ever have touched in contact with such as these. But the subject was never referred to between them, and Esther herself seemed quite unconscious or oblivious of it. She had her own memories without doubt, but she kept them silent as ever, and this London that she and Gerald saw together was a very different world from the one she had moved in with her mother. The drab outskirts of Soho touch close on the glitter and splendour of the west end, but the poverty and dirt and crime are unseen unless one turns up into her slums off the beaten track, and Gerald and Esther did no exploring.

There was one evening, however, which remained for a little while rather painfully fixed in Gerald's mind,

because on that occasion he saw Esther for the first time in his knowledge of her, swayed out of her habitual calm by the force of some other personality. The shock lay in the fact that she could be thus moved and that he so far had not succeeded in doing it. They had been to see a piece of Gerald's choosing that evening—a musical comedy with the usual star lady, who had been, on his last visit home, rather a flame of Gerald's—pretty girls in the chorus, fat comedian and throaty tenor, that is anyway how Gerald would have described him; the fellow could sing, that he was bound to admit, but otherwise he dismissed him from the score of the evening's entertainment. Not so Esther; Gerald looking round at her after the curtain had gone down on the tenor's final powerful solo in the first act, was surprised to see her sitting forward, her hands clasped in front of her, face slightly flushed, eyes shining. He had in fact to speak to her twice before he caught her attention; then she turned to him, and he was startled for the moment by the vivid beauty of her face.

"Isn't he wonderful?" she asked.

"Wonderful—who?" retorted Gerald; he had an insane desire to kiss her and was also aware of an uncomfortable spasm of jealousy.

"That man," whispered Esther; her eyes dropped to the programme on her lap. "I won't look at his name," she asserted. "I like to think of him as he is on the stage, his voice just carries one into dreamland." Her breath was coming a little fast; Gerald fought manfully with a desire to swear.

"You mean the hero chap, do you?" he asked; "suppose he's all right—not much to look at though, is he—I

mean ? ” he floundered a little by now being thoroughly jealous ; “ rotten profession for a man to take up, painting one’s face and capering.”

Esther looked round at him for a second ; the animation had gone from her face but her eyes were still wide and starry. “ With a voice like that he could make you do anything he wanted,” she said.

“ Not me,” answered Gerald ; his mouth set fiercely.

Time didn’t permit of further argument for the lights were lowered and the curtain up, but this time Gerald paid scant attention to the stage ; his eyes were on Esther, and under cover of the friendly gloom he felt for and found one warm soft arm. It gave him a thrill of possession the near touch of her, but just to-night, for this second, he wanted more ; he wanted the heart and soul of her and doubted his ownership thereof ; though as he argued to himself it was clean ridiculous to be jealous of an actor fellow like this. Esther was unconscious of his hand, oblivious to his eyes, she was for the time being completely under the spell of the singer’s magic and in the second interval Gerald, fearing for the control of his temper, fled out for a smoke:

During the drive home, however, he was once more forced to probe the question, but this time attempted humour. “ Well,” he asked, “ spell beginning to wear off ? ”

Esther sitting far back in her corner of the carriage, her furs pulled close round her, shook her head. “ No,” she said, “ I would like to go to-morrow and the day after and the day after again.”

“ I wouldn’t,” grunted Gerald. He leant forward and let down the window nearest him with a jerk ; the taxi

had just turned out of the noisy, busy thoroughfare of Pall Mall into the park ; great shadows of trees and bushes and vacant spaces lay on either side of them.

Gerald turned to Esther ; he could hardly see her now except when a passing lamp lit up for a second white furs and face. " You don't really mean that, do you, Esther ? " he said ; " it's just put on to rot me ; I admit to being jealous, dear ; don't go on with it—it hurts me."

" Does it ? " asked Esther, her voice cool and friendly. " I am sorry. I wasn't thinking about you, I am afraid, but I did mean it ; that man's voice—well," she broke off with half a little laugh—" if he sang to me first and then asked me to commit the worst crime you can think of, I would do it ; I think it's a sort of mesmerism." Her laugh ended in a sigh ; she lifted her arms letting the heavy furs slip back. He could see a gleam of white neck and shoulders.

" I don't seem ever to have mesmerised you," he said miserably.

" No," admitted Esther ; she was silent a minute or two. The taxi swung past Buckingham Palace out into the streets again. " Sometimes I wish you could," she went on ; " it would be better for both of us."

" Wouldn't it be the same if you loved me ? " asked Gerald ; he turned to her eagerly, " and you do love me now-a-days, just a bit, don't you, Esther ? "

" It's the evil in me that wants to be mesmerised, I expect," said Esther. " There's something wild and lawless in me that won't answer to love." Then she laughed again and slipped out a hand on to his. " Never mind, we won't go near this particular charmer again. I give up even the idea of him to you ; are you satisfied ? "

Gerald picked up the hand in his and touched his lips to it. "I am a jealous fool," he whispered ; "but God, if you know how it hurt me to see you looking at that fellow and realizing that you never felt like that for me. I love you so much, Esther, sometimes it's hell to think it all means nothing to you."

"But it means a lot," she contradicted quickly ; "all the good in me loves you, Gerald ; the trouble is that I'm not all good."

It was the next afternoon that they chanced upon little Miss Thomas in the park. She would if possible have avoided them for she had had her own share of trouble in this world, and meeting Gerald's wife was not an easy task for her ; but as it happened Gerald caught sight of her first and sped across the grass to greet her.

"Hullo, Miss Thomas ! You in London ! What's up with Shillong this year ?"

Little Miss Thomas gathered her shreds of courage round her and faced him smiling, though the very cheerfulness of his greeting sent a stab to her heart.

"It must be deserted, mustn't it ?" she said, "unless of course, which is more than probable, there are new faces and new scandals to take one's place. I go East again in a fortnight though."

"Do you ?" asked Gerald, "so do we ; wonder if we'll strike the same boat. Come across and talk to the missis ; we have been asked to the Bholpur Christmas Camp and she is puzzled as to clothes. You might be able to give her some hints. Do you remember last Christmas ?"

Did she remember last Christmas ? Had he so com-

pletely forgotten ? Miss Thomas glanced at him and sighed, he was so palpably innocent of any memory. However she followed obediently to Esther, and gave her all the valuable information she could at that moment think of. It appeared that Miss Thomas was to go out on the same boat as the Hamiltons ; she was also on her way to join her brother at Rawl Pindi which was to be finally the Hamiltons' station, so they parted with the prospect of seeing a good deal of each other in the not distant future. A prospect not all of unmixed joy to Miss Thomas ; she had always, from the beginning of their acquaintance, been conscious of a quite un-understandable dislike for Esther, rising principally in a strong disapproval, and Esther as wife to Gerald she found even more difficult to appreciate.

"Good sort, isn't she ?" asked Gerald, as he and his wife strolled on after having said *au revoir* to Miss Thomas.

"Yes," agreed Esther. "I wonder why you didn't marry her," she added. "She would have been very fond of you."

"Rot," retorted Gerald ; "anyway I was too busy falling in love with you to even think of other girls." None-the-less Esther's remark succeeded where Miss Thomas's rather pathetic glances had failed. It woke in him an uneasy memory of a past flirtation and the season before he had been busy falling in love with Esther.

That evening brought an excited, slightly unintelligible letter from old Mrs. Hamilton, full of the Bholpur shooting episode. "Some one has tried to kill Jack ; it's very dreadful," she wrote. "It seems he would

certainly have succeeded if it had not been for some native prince who interfered and saved Jack's life. Marjorie does not appear to me to be properly grateful. The man's name is Ishaq Khan, the man who saved Jack, I mean; do either you or Esther know of him?"

"Marjorie not grateful? What on earth does the master mean?" snorted Gerald; he handed the letter over to Esther and could not forbear glancing curiously at her face while she read it.

It told him nothing. Esther slipped the letter back into its envelope when she had finished it and answered his question.

"I should imagine," she said, "that Marjorie would find it very difficult to see good in anything done by some one she has once disliked."

"She is very loyal, if that's what you mean," answered Gerald, rather warmly. "The same would apply to any one; if she loves you you can do no wrong in her eyes; but she would never be unfair."

"I dare say not," agreed Esther quietly. She stood up. "I have had little opportunity of judging her capacity for love, Gerald; she does not love me, you see."

"That's nonsense." Gerald pushed back his chair and rose too. "Sometimes I think you say a thing of that sort on purpose to hurt me, Esther," he said. "You know Marjorie has always done all she possibly can to help us—both of us."

For the second, anger flamed in Esther's heart; it was on her lips to answer, "What she did was done more for hate of some one than for love of me," but she choked it back; what was the use of fighting with Gerald?

"She is very fond of you anyway," she said finally.

"I think I am going to bed very early to-night, Gerald ; I am tired and to-morrow there's that awful boat in prospect ; don't wake me if you can help it, when you come."

"All right dear," agreed Gerald. "I'll write a line to mother and finish my own packing ; but I shan't be last either." He came across the room to her. "Do you hate the idea of India as much as you did when we left ?" he said suddenly.

"What made you think of that all of a sudden ?" asked Esther.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Gerald. "I was remembering that last day in Bombay and how you said 'I hate it ; I never want to come back to it—never.' I just wondered whether it wasn't rather selfish of me not to chuck the regiment and get something to do at home, if you really felt like that about it. I want so much to make you happy, Esther, to do the best I can for that end."

A sudden fear waked in Esther's eyes ; she did not lift them to his.

"I don't suppose I knew what I wanted myself that time in Bombay," she said ; "anyway it certainly isn't what I feel now. I have been home-sick for India ever since the first week in Scotland. Things are so grey and cold here. I want the sun, the blaze of colour—the hot wind from the plains. Don't you feel like that sometimes, too ?"

"Can't say I do," Gerald had to admit ; "but I'm not sorry to be getting back to work and polo. Well that's all right, dear ;" he bent to kiss her. "My mind is at rest ; I hated to think I was dragging you back."

Dragging her back. Esther brushing her hair out before the mirror in her bedroom, repeated the phrase to herself and bent forward to stare at her reflection in the glass. Her own eyes gazed back wide and restless ; was there not something dragging her heart back to India even at this moment, and that something quite apart from anything to do with Gerald ? Was she afraid or glad for the secret knowledge—or merely ashamed, just bitterly ashamed ?

CHAPTER XVII

"**Y**ES, it may certainly be awkward," Jack Hamilton agreed. He stood switching with his riding cane at the long grasses that grew near the opening of the tent; "but I don't see how we are going to avoid it, Marjorie. It will look jolly pointed if we don't ask the man, and after that affair at Bholpur we do owe him a decent show of amiability."

Marjorie Hamilton, sitting at her writing table, glanced up at her husband and sighed. Spread all round her in pleasant confusion were invitation cards and envelopes galore, for Mrs. Hamilton was struggling at the moment with the invitations for the ball which was to be given at the break up of the Bholpur Christmas camp.

The social duties of the Bholpur Camp had for the last three years fallen on Mrs. Hamilton's shoulders and till this year she had thoroughly enjoyed doing it. It was such a cheery, informal little gathering, the Bholpur Christmas Camp, elephant rides and shoots, tennis tournaments of a very mild variety, two dances, a ball and, whenever nothing else was on, impromptu concerts round the camp fire of an evening, and all this gaiety crammed into a short ten days. This year, however, as far as Mrs. Hamilton was concerned there was to be a fly in the ointment, the fly in question being Prince Ishaq

Khan. Never before had he been included in the Bholpur week, though the Resident and Dr. Brown were always present, but this year Jack had suddenly decided that he must be asked to the ball.

"If only Gerald and Esther were not going to be here," Marjorie said presently, voicing the secret anxiety of her heart, "I should not mind for myself a bit. I hate having to be polite to him, because I don't trust him, but——"

"Look here, Marjorie," Jack turned, "it's all nonsense. I never knew such an old lady as you are for remembering a grudge. Esther is a respectable married woman by now; do put that idea out of your head and resign yourself to being nice to the fellow for once. I honestly think we must ask him, so does McDermot; it's politic, for one thing."

Marjorie sighed again and picked up her pen.

"Very well," she agreed, "I'll get the note sent off to-day; I only wish there was a chance of his refusing. I don't feel a bit happy about it."

"It will be all right, don't worry," laughed her husband; his point being gained, he cheerfully turned his back on the subject. "I'll be back in time for breakfast," he vouchsafed in parting, then he swung out of the tent and Mrs. Hamilton could hear him shout remarks to the sais as he rode off.

The note in question having been written and addressed in her neat handwriting to Prince Ishaq Khan, The Palace, Bholpur, Mrs. Hamilton moved out into the compound, and calling for a chuprassi, dispatched it forthwith, then, turning her attention to other matters, resolutely determined to forget her presentiments on the subject.

The camp lay round her a wilderness of clean white tents sprouting up under the skilful hands of the chuprassies, rather like giant mushrooms. There was the big central shamiana, in which the ball and dances would be held, looking already very important and gay, with flags flying and a raised polished dancing floor ; round it in order ranged the guests' tents, big tents, medium tents, small tents, a network of ropes and pegs ; and beyond again the servants' quarters, the kitchen camp, the straw erected stables, the elephant lines. The jungles of Bholpur made a splendid background to the whole scene, and in front the ground had been cleared and prepared, looking from a distance anyway like a wide beautifully swept lawn—an encampment, sprung into being at a moment's command, to vanish just as easily and quickly at a word ten days later.

The Hamiltons usually arrived a day earlier than the rest of the party to settle things to a certain extent before the week opened, and every time she witnessed it, Mrs. Hamilton was compelled to admire the whole-hearted way their army of domestics set themselves to work to transform what was usually a jungle patch into a habitable home and playground for the sahibs.

Gerald and Esther's tent she had arranged should be next to theirs ; before going back to her own she slipped across to it to see if it was all as comfortable as could be wished. The young couple were arriving that morning from England, and it was Esther's first experience of a camp. Mrs. Hamilton was more than anxious that the girl should like it. At the back of Mrs. Hamilton's mind was the pressing desire to make real friends with Gerald's wife this time ; perhaps after four months of

married life Esther would find there was more in common between them than there had been before.

The tent, anyway, could not have been nicer, Mrs. Hamilton thought ; then she frowned for though she had ordered just a few flowers to be put in, the mali had apparently let his fancy run riot and on every available table and stand there were vases overflowing with great cut branches of the flowering mohgra tree. The scent was a little overpowering ; she would have called a servant to take them away, but at that moment the sound of some one arriving was heard outside and with just one more quick glance round, Mrs. Hamilton hurried out to receive the newcomers. The flowers were after all very beautiful ; she would tell Esther to throw them away afterwards and explain that they had been an uninvited gift from the mali.

She said as much to Esther as she showed her into the tent later on, but the girl expressed herself delighted with the decoration, in fact her first movement was to one of the heavily laden bowls and she stooped to bury her face in the blossoms.

"I think," she said, speaking more to herself than to Mrs. Hamilton, "that I have been home-sick for the sight and scent of these, ever since I left India."

Then she looked up, and seeing Mrs. Hamilton's puzzled glance laughed a little.

"You can't think," she said, "how glad I am to be back. England was so grey, so colourless ; I have been longing for heat and colour."

Standing so, with the blue veil of her sun hat making a shadow for her vivid hair, she looked surprisingly

beautiful, but despite the laughter on her lips the changing eyes were not happy.

At that moment Gerald, having finished his instructions as to the luggage outside, pushed aside the chik and entered.

"Oh Lord!" he remarked cheerfully, flinging his hat and stick on the nearest chair, "warm for this time of year, isn't it, Marje? Phew!" He had just become aware of the flowers. "Aren't those things a bit heavy?"

"Yes," agreed Marjorie; "I was telling Esther they are the mali's idea of decoration, not mine, but I should advise you to risk hurting his feelings and get rid of them."

"Should rather think we would; horrible stink they've got." Gerald laughed and turned to the door. "With your permission Marjorie, I'll order a long drink."

Esther had not moved; she spoke now, and Marjorie fancied that a rather tired contempt sounded in the voice.

"Gerald is so English," she said, and she moved away from the flowers, "every beautiful scent is a stink, and the hot weather merely an excuse for a drink. I loved the flowers."

"Well, dear one," Gerald called back goodnaturedly, "if you like the flowers of course they shall stay; I don't really mind them."

He did not turn to look at her, but Mrs. Hamilton was surprised to see the quick flush rise to Esther's face, and, but for the fact that it was plainly ridiculous, she could have sworn there were tears in the girl's eyes. She certainly spoke very hurriedly.

"No, no," she said, "they shall go; you are quite right,

Gerald, they are far too strong." She moved rapidly about the room gathering the flowering branches until her arms were full. "We will throw them away," she said turning to Mrs. Hamilton, "where shall I put them?"

"I'll call Mary Ann," Mrs. Hamilton volunteered. She was a little worried at the whole scene. "She will take them outside for us and I will explain to the mali he must not do this kind of thing again."

Mary Ann removed the armful of blossoms calmly, she also, in the absence of her mistress delivered a scathing rebuke to the mali.

"Oh, naked one," she asserted, "what mad whim was this to fill up the meimsahibs tent with such native trash?"

"'Twas no whim of mine," retorted that worthy gravely; he kicked the drooping blossoms into a seemly pile. "'Twas a hookum from the Palace folk."

Mary Ann's eyes widened, no surprise however was permitted to show itself in her voice.

"Palace folk," she sneered, one firm eye on the mali's bland countenance, "why trouble to lie to me, unworthy one, since there is no punishment even for the deed."

"'Tis no lie," the other answered; absolute unconsciousness shone in the countenance he turned on her. "This morning were the blossoms given to me, with the news of this mem's coming and orders how they were to be placed to greet her. 'Tis some fancy of the Great One in the Palace, upon whom be peace."

"Fancy," snorted Mary Ann; she saw further and knew more than the mali. "See to it anyhow that you carry out no such orders again. Here we are not Palace folk,"

Then she went off with an unmistakable swagger of her full petticoats, but though no word of her information was shared with her mistress, later on in the evening she favoured Shahjahan with an account of it as they sat at the tent doors waiting for their respective mistresses. The telling left Shahjahan comparatively cold ; he had but little opinion of his new mistress and no respect for women of any sort, but his feeling towards the Great One of the Palace was emphasized in the vivid way in which he spat after the name was mentioned ; he had a true native's abhorrence for a fellow native who apes European ways.

The rest of the guests arrived during the course of that day and the next, Dr. Crow among the number, eyeglass and polished manner very much to the front. He bowed over Esther's hand and managed to convey a wealth of congratulation into his few words with Marjorie. He insisted on regarding her as entirely responsible for what he was now pleased to describe as a radiantly happy marriage.

McDermot and Dr. Brown arrived rather late on the evening of the second day, and to McDermot was deputed the task of taking Esther into dinner.

"Lucky dog," as Brown remarked ; "the most beautiful girl I have ever dreamt of."

But apart from that, and her beauty it may be noted would not affect the Scotchman very much, McDermot was interested in Esther for a reason all his own. She was strangely silent and difficult to talk to, he found, but he was content himself to watch her. She was so palpably inattentive and uninterested in what was going on round her, McDermot was curious to know the

reason, his shrewd mind suspected something behind her mask of indifference.

Brown on the other hand was more openly and intently a victim. After dinner nothing would do for him but that Esther should come and see the elephant lines by moonlight, they were worth a visit, he insisted. Esther went, a slight wrap thrown over her shoulders, and McDermot, rather to Brown's disgust, accompanied them. The elephant lines were certainly weird by moonlight ; the great animals standing like immovable hulks, with only here and there a huge ear flapping or a long snake-like trunk extended. Esther stood silent for some time watching them.

"It's very wonderful," she whispered presently.

"Wonderful," agreed Dr. Brown, "and a strange wonder too, don't you think. I never quite like the night in India," he bubbled on, "it gives me a sort of feeling as if it was full of things I couldn't see."

"I love it," Esther answered, "just love it, the wonder of it, the strangeness of it, the unknown."

McDermot moved a little so as to see her face.

"'Umph !'" commented Dr. Brown ; from the servants' quarters the sound of a high-pitched man's voice chanting reached them. "I am not so sure about loving it, Mrs. Hamilton ; there you will find a kindred soul in McDermot, he loves India better than anything else in this world, I think."

"Does he ?" asked Esther ; she half turned towards McDermot but she did not sound very convinced. The man's voice died away and in its place the slow throbbing of a tom-tom filled the air.

McDermot saw Esther shiver ; almost instinctively

she turned to Brown again, her hand caught at his arm.
“ What was that ? ” she asked. McDermot could have sworn her voice was tense with fear.

Brown took the hand she had given him reassuringly.
“ That is some beastly native fellow making what he is pleased to call music,” he explained, “ did it startle you ? ”

“ The sound frightens me,” said Esther. McDermot could see her eyes straining into the darkness in the direction of the noise. “ I have never heard them so close before.”

“ Haven’t you,” he asked, speaking for the first time.
“ You should hear them at Bholpur sometimes,” he went on as they turned back towards the lights of the tents, “ round the Prince’s Palace ; there they must have a hundred of them going at a time. I have often wondered how Prince Ishaq Khan likes it with his English notions.”

“ Ishaq Khan.” Esther’s voice was hardly a question, it still held some note of fear.

“ Our particular pet Prince,” Brown interrupted cheerfully. “ McDermot and I, Mrs. Hamilton, are so to speak bear leaders to the reigning prince of Bholpur. Not that he needs much leading being a good deal more of a society man than either of us. Have you ever met him ? ”

“ No, I have never met him,” answered Esther ; they had reached by now the lit-up space in front of the shamiana.

“ Then you will on Thursday week,” put in McDermot ; he watched her face as he spoke, “ he is coming to the ball that evening.”

From inside the shamiana, a girl's voice could be heard singing clear and sweet, every word very distinct.

" Dear, as you wonder,
Over peace and passion,
Searching the days to prove yourself untrue.
You cannot hide me, still in my own fashion,
I will come back to you,
I will come back to you."

" That is Miss Edwardes," Brown volunteered as the song ended ; " nice voice, she has got, hasn't she. Shall we go inside, Mrs. Hamilton, or would you like a chair found for you out here ? "

Esther did not seem to hear him ; she had dropped his arm and faced round towards the jungle again ; to McDermot it seemed as if she was listening intently to hear some sound break its silence, and he noticed at the same time that the tom-tom had ceased. Brown had to repeat his question before he got an answer.

" We will go in," Mrs. Hamilton said, " and will you find my husband for me, I am a little tired."

In the week that followed McDermot found himself seeing a good deal of Mrs. Gerald Hamilton. For one thing, Esther did not play tennis or ride, and McDermot for the time being happened to be *hors de combat* with a bad knee. They did not talk much in the hours they spent together, but a curious undefined friendship sprang up between them. It fascinated him in a way he would not have believed possible, to sit near her and watch her face, the faint wonderful colouring in cheeks and lips, the changing quick shadowed eyes. He learned to know, though he was surprised at himself for the knowledge, just how the lashes lay when she lowered her eyes, the way

her hair grew in soft curls where it was brushed up from her neck.

Sometimes he spoke to her of India, of his love for India and its people. It amazed him a little to realize how much she understood of his feeling, but he never spoke again of Ishaq Khan ; he knew she had lied that evening in saying that she had not met the man and he did not care that she should ever have to lie to him again. Dr. Crow would sometimes make a third at their *tête-à-têtes* ; McDermot was not sure that he appreciated the addition ; he had a feeling that the little man and his absurd eyeglass were taking stock of Esther, putting her under a careful, keen-witted scrutiny, and his liking for the girl, even though he was not aware of it himself, had advanced far enough for him to resent that.

As for Marjorie, though she did not make very great headway with her new sister-in-law, she was satisfied at least to see how radiantly happy Gerald appeared, and that, after all, as she constantly reassured herself, was what really mattered. If she could not get any further with Esther it was probably because there was nothing to know in the girl. She was palpably a little stupid, a great many very beautiful women are—that was Dr. Crow's explanation—and Marjorie had perforce to rest content with it.

The evening before the ball, she and Esther found themselves both making off to their tents and bed rather earlier than the rest of the people, the younger and more frivolous members of the party having voted for games round the camp fire.

“ We have got a couple of frivolous husbands, haven't we ? ” Marjorie asked, as they picked their way over the

various tent ropes. "I suppose Gerald is playing hunt the slipper with the best of them, and I know Jack is ; he said he would score off Miss Edwardes to-night or know the reason why."

"Yes," agreed Esther, "the last I saw of Gerald was showing Dr. Crow how to buck jump somebody off your back."

Marjorie laughed. "They will be children still," she said, "long after we have grown old. Come into my tent, won't you," she went on half timidly, in her effort at companionship. "I will send away Mary Ann and we will have a talk. I have seen so little of you this week and the day after to-morrow you will be gone."

It was too dark for her to see if Esther was astonished and without waiting for an answer she turned and led the way in.

"You and I have got to be friends," she went on, pushing forward a comfortable chair for Esther and sitting down herself. "Gerald has always meant such a lot to me, you know, more than a mere ordinary brother, and you—"

"You have always been most kind to me," Esther broke in. "If I have seemed ungrateful, indeed it is not because I have felt it, only—" she sat rather stiffly in her chair and her eyes were lowered, "I am so hopelessly bad at expressing myself."

Marjorie sighed impatiently, but checked it at once. "My dear," she said, "I don't want you to be grateful, or anything of that sort, I want you to like me."

"And you?" asked Esther; suddenly she lifted her eyes : there was something of defiance in them. "Do you like me? Oh, no, I shouldn't have asked that," she went

on, and she rose abruptly from her chair moving away a little. "I did not mean it ; you have all been so good to me, so kind. You, and Gerald's father and mother, and your husband. You have taken me on trust, haven't you, for Gerald's sake ?" She turned round to face Mrs. Hamilton. "Are you going to love me on trust for the same reason ?"

Mrs. Hamilton had risen too ; she crossed over quickly to the girl ; something in the half bitter speech had touched her into a warmer feeling of compassion, of understanding.

"We are going to love you for yourself," she answered and slipped a hand into Esther's.

Then, because just for the second they had touched on the raw heart of things and were consequently a little abashed, and to turn the conversation, Mrs. Hamilton drew Esther's attention to a framed portrait of Baby Bobby that stood on the table near them.

"Do you think he is like Gerald ?" she asked ; "if he had grown up he would have been very like him, I think, that is what makes me so fond of Gerald."

It was very much letting Esther into her holy of holies, but it is to be doubted if the girl realized that. She bent away to study the picture.

"Yes, it is like Gerald," she agreed, her voice singularly cold and unappreciative.

Mrs. Hamilton put a sudden jealous hand on the picture ; it was as if the careless voice had belittled it.

"You do not care for children ?" she said, and hardly knew herself why the question rose so abruptly to her lips.

"No," Esther answered ; she moved towards the door.

"I am afraid that is another thing we would not have in common, I don't like children."

It is hard for one's good intentions always to be ruthlessly brought up short. Mrs. Hamilton was aware of a fresh feeling of antagonism springing up between her and Esther, and with all the good will in the world, she could not make her voice sound friendly as she answered the other's "Good-night," and she was of course quite unaware of the hot tears of bitter contrition that were already blinding Esther as she turned to go.

So the two women, poles asunder in nature, were swept yet further apart by Mrs. Hamilton's efforts at friendliness, and the twinge of compassion that Esther had aroused for one understanding second was to be completely swamped in the wave of rigid disapproval which her last words brought to Mrs. Hamilton. As Dr. Crow was to testify to later on, a good woman, once convinced of evil in others, can be as hard as iron itself to their misfortunes.

CHAPTER XVIII

The transient sorrow you cause me now
Will fade away in the distance dim,
But love is a God, and I wonder how
You will make your peace with him."

THE camp on the festive occasion of the ball bore a striking resemblance to an enchanted grove. From every available tree, Chinese lanterns hung and twinkled, while the paths between the tents, and the tent poles themselves, were all picked out in little coloured oil lamps, a form of decoration at which natives are past masters. Flaming torches indicated the principal approach, and the shamiana had been transformed into an open air dancing floor, with circle of soft lights for the band and rows upon rows of swinging lanterns as its only other illumination. So far the moon had not risen, but later on she would be at her brightest and it was the avowed custom at these Christmas camps to let the lanterns flicker out as the night drew to a close and to dance the last few dances to the magical light of the moon. Quite three engagements were expected to occur to-night by the lookers on ; some excitement, a certain thrill of expectation seemed to be animating every one, and to add to the enchantment fancy dress has been voted on for the ball.

Esther was representing the Spirit of Moonlight to-night ; it was a dress she had brought from home with

her ; McDermot could not have explained it, but he knew it to be marvellous, soft, white and shimmery, and his hurried glance, as he came out after dinner to join the ladies, quite failed to trace her anywhere among 'the crowd. Gerald was there, resplendent as a Black Heart Knight, Marjorie, looking very prim and sedate as Olivia, Miss Edwardes, twinkling with bells as a Folly, numerous Pierrots and Pierrettes, Cow Boys and Flower Girls. Dr. Brown had selected a Viking as being most suitable for himself and was feeling slightly ruffled at the humour his appearance caused. The person who occasioned more mirth than any one else, however, was Dr. Crow. On a hurried inspiration he had wired to Calcutta for a Julius Cæsar outfit, and he had insisted on donning the costume despite the fact that the essential part of it appeared to have been mislaid in the post.

McDermot who had made a point of being, quite against his usual custom, early among the dancers with the undefined desire of securing a few dances with Mrs. Gerald Hamilton, found himself drawn into a group of men who were passing judgment upon Crow's rig out.

"It won't do, old man," Gerald was remarking ; "we simply cannot allow you to go among the ladies like that. The Lord delighteth not, etc., you know."

Crow screwed in his eyeglass and devoted a pained attention to his lower ext. emities, which were certainly guiltless of any covering, unless the strapping of his shoes could be described as such.

"The toga is all right," he explained carefully, "and very fairly lengthy ; perhaps these Roman fellows didn't wear trousers."

"But yours isn't a respectable kilt even," put in

Donaldson, he himself most suitably arrayed as a Troubadour.

"I can't help whether it's respectable or not," proclaimed Crow, "I like it," he settled the wreath of green bays more firmly on his head, "and I am not going to dance; I don't see why it shouldn't be all right to sit out in."

"Take me where the gloaming lurks," chanted Gerald. "If you promise not to dance, perhaps we will let you pass. What say you, McDermot?" he turned to the Resident who had elected to appear in plain evening dress; "you look the most sober of us and therefore most capable of judging?"

McDermot laughed. "All the world has gone mad to-night," he said; "I am only a looker-on, not a judge."

As the group broke up to let Crow pass, McDermot became aware that the guest of the evening, and one for whom he was in a sort of way responsible, namely Prince Ishaq Khan, was arriving, attended with not a little pomp and ceremony, at which McDermot was slightly surprised. Not that he had imagined for one moment that Ishaq Khan would come attired in fancy dress, all natives have an inherent contempt for such a slackening of dignity, but he had expected that the Prince would keep him company and don ordinary English clothes. Instead of which the tall majestic figure which followed slowly after the bowing equerries was arrayed in all the splendour of the state robes of Bholpur—robes which were centuries old in fashion and dating from the same period as the flaming Bholpur jewel that flashed in his turban. It was a strikingly effective entrance; never had Ishaq

Khan looked so much a king, and for a second, McDermot was angry that he should have chosen that night when they themselves were rather at a disadvantage to appear amongst them so regal. Then such thoughts were pushed aside, for suddenly McDermot saw Esther. She had just stepped into the circle of lights, and stood, her hands at her side, her head a little thrown back, her eyes wide on the advancing figure of Ishaq Khan. The lights were caught and reflected in the moonstones she wore in her hair, her face was white, her lips vividly crimson as if she had bitten them till they bled, but what held McDermot silent when he reached her side, was the look in her eyes. Once he had seen a woman hypnotised against her will, and she looked just as Mrs. Hamilton looked now, as she waited for Ishaq Khan to come to her. In a flash all that he had heard of the Shillong scandal came into McDermot's mind, and instinctively he placed himself between Esther and the Rajah.

"Mrs. Hamilton," he said, "what of our dances—you have given me no definite numbers—which may I have?"

Over his head, for McDermot's proportions were rather squat, Esther's eyes met those others, narrowed, watchful and contemptuous; her voice when she answered McDermot sounded like one talking in her sleep.

"Dances," she said, "I don't think I am going to dance to-night."

Marjorie and Jack had stepped forward to greet Ishaq Khan; he stopped to speak to them.

"Well then, what numbers are you going to sit out with me?" McDermot persisted. "What about this

one to begin with, then we can settle the others in comfort?" "

He offered his arm and Esther took it letting him lead her away to two chairs outside the dancing radius.

" You are tired at the very beginning of the evening," he said, watching her face in the shadows.

" Yes, I am tired," Esther agreed. She made no further attempt at conversation. He took her card and scribbled his name opposite one or two dances; she apparently agreed. What about supper? he asked; no she was going into supper with Gerald.

The first waltz started and swung to its finish. Brown, after a prolonged search, discovered their hiding place and eagerly claimed his share of Esther's company; they had to move out into the lighted space again. Esther was quickly the centre of a little crowd of partners.

McDermot wandered off in search of the card tent, and a good deal later on in the evening, found himself at the refreshment table with Dr. Crow.

" Toga been a success?" he asked sarcastically.

" Quite, thank you," the other answered; he drank off his whisky and soda in a gulp and turned abruptly to McDermot.

" Why the devil," he asked, " did you allow that pet villain of yours here this evening?"

" Pet villain," repeated McDermot; for the moment he was honestly perplexed.

" Are things uncomfortable," Crow went on, " or is it my imagination?" He put an arm through McDermot's and led him back to the dancing floor. " What do you make of that?" with a nod of his head he indicated a couple dancing just in front of them.

McDermot frowned ; he did not like to see Esther dancing with Ishaq Khan, but on the other hand he was not sure that it was any business of Crow's either way.

" You can't ask a man to your balls and refuse to allow your women folk to dance with him," he answered curtly.

Crow screwed in his eyeglass and surveyed him gravely.

" That is not what I meant exactly, he said ; then catching sight of a possible partner he departed.

McDermot stood for a little watching the swaying couples. He was more perturbed than he cared to admit over Crow's remarks, and wished very ardently that he had not backed up Jack Hamilton's desire to have Ishaq Khan invited. He went into supper rather moodily on his own, and it did not add to his enjoyment to find on returning to the ball-room to claim his last dance with Esther that she was nowhere to be found.

Gerald he ran into on his search ; the young man was standing at one of the shamiana entrances staring into the dark.

" Seen your wife anywhere ? " asked McDermot in passing ; " this is our dance.

" No," Gerald answered ; his voice sounded troubled and a little angry ; he did not vouchsafe any further assistance.

That waltz number drew to a finish, and the next ; it was growing late ; one by one the lanterns on the neighbouring trees and those lining the shamiana had flickered and gone out ; a great yellow moon swung overhead throwing grotesque shadows everywhere ; the forest of Bholpur seemed like a black cloud on the horizon ; under her light the tents of the camp showed like white

ghosts. The excitement which had been in the air at the beginning of the evening, had intensified ; to the initiated few it revolved round the prolonged absence of Mrs. Gerald Hamilton and Prince Ishaq Khan. Marjorie's face wore an anxious expression ; her eyes hardly ever left her brother-in-law's figure as he moved restlessly about from door to door ; Jack Hamilton looked, and was, cross and worried ; Dr. Crow intensely interested. One or two ladies, chaperons and lookers-on for the most part, whispered the information to each other with a little additional remembered scandal ; the larger proportion of the guests were however happily oblivious ; one couple more or less amongst the dancers could hardly be noticeable.

McDermot, towards the close of the twentieth dance, decided on a cigarette outside for himself, and lighting one slipped away quietly in the direction of his tent. Sitting out places had been arranged within a certain radius of the camp ; he had gone far beyond the last of these, when he was brought suddenly to a halt by the sound of some one speaking in English. The voice, for on the instant he recognized it, more than the words made him hold his breath and forget for the moment that he was playing the spy. For the voice was Ishaq Khan's, low pitched and strangely compelling.

"You had to come," he was saying ; "why struggle any more ? the whole of you, heart, body and soul are mine ; have you not known it all this long time, Esther ? "

That sudden name roused McDermot into a sense of what he was overhearing ; with a quick intake of breath he stumbled over a neighbouring tent rope and said "Damn" as audibly as he could.

In the pause that followed, while with a good deal of noise he pretended to pick himself up and rub some injured member, he heard close to him a sound as if some one caught their breath on a cry of fear. Then a match was struck and Ishaq Khan's voice, calm and unruffled, asked if any one was hurt. McDermot as he lifted his eyes to answer, caught the shimmering whiteness of Esther's face and figure before the light went out.

"Oh, it's you, is it Prince ?" he said gruffly, "thought I heard voices before I fell over the tent rope ; couldn't distinguish them, though. Hope, Mrs. Hamilton, you weren't too scandalized at my outburst of language."

Esther moved a little away ; at this direct attack she turned quickly.

"Oh, no," she said, her words a little hurried ; "were you looking for me ; it is our dance, isn't it ?"

She had come over beside him ; he could just catch the glimmer of the stones in her hair.

It was not his dance, nor was he likely to be looking for her in such a place, yet it almost seemed to McDermot that an appeal had sounded in her question, and he rose to it at once.

"Yes," he lied nobly, "it is our dance. I had almost given you up in despair, but I am very tenacious when I once want a thing. Shall we go back ?"

"Yes," said Esther ; he could feel her hand now on his coat sleeve. "Good-night," she said ; it was almost a whisper to the other waiting figure.

"*Au revoir*, Madame," the deep voice answered, "and if McDermot will make my excuses, I will not return to the shamiana, but go straight to my carriage, it has been waiting for me."

McDermot fancied, though he carefully refrained from glancing back, that the stately figure stood still watching them till they were out of sight. He was too thoroughly angry even to have answered the Prince's last remark, and he and Esther said nothing to each other until they were practically at the door of the shamiana and Gerald could be seen making his way towards them. Then McDermot turned to Esther.

"I don't know, Mrs. Hamilton, that it is any business of mine, but it was hardly my fault that I should have overheard something the Prince was saying as I came up to you. I know the Prince almost as well as I know the palm of my own hand, and he is not fit to touch or even breathe the same air as you ; that is all I want to say, and should you ever need help, will you remember that mine is always at your service."

Why he added that last sentence he hardly knew, unless it was because somehow he felt as she stood beside him that she was afraid. Then he turned with a cheerful and amiable smile to greet Gerald.

"I found Mrs. Hamilton, as you see," he said, "and claimed a dance or two in recompense for the one she cut me. We were both of us a little too exhausted to think of dancing."

Gerald hardly appeared to hear him ; he was too angry, McDermot saw, to remember appearances, and he spoke directly to his wife.

"If you are tired, Esther, hadn't we better be saying good-night and going ? "

For a moment McDermot stood undecided between them ; he wanted so much to protect Esther from herself, to show Gerald how stupid was the tone he was

taking up, but one glance at the boy's face, white and stern made him realize how useless any interference would be. He did the only thing that was left him to do.

"Good-night," he said, taking Esther's hand, "and in a sense good-bye, for Brown and I are off back to Bholpur to-night or rather this morning."

"Good-night," repeated Esther, and meeting her eyes McDermot was struck once more with their curious blankness.

"Good-bye, McDermot," said Gerald curtly ; "I don't expect we shall put in an appearance again before you are off."

McDermot stood aside to let them pass, then went on himself to say his farewells and collect Dr. Brown for the homeward journey. He was curiously depressed and worried as at some impending calamity.

"It hasn't been a nice evening, has it ?" asked Marjorie as she shook hands with him ; "somehow I feel wretched now."

"You are tired, I expect," he said, "or perhaps there is a trace of thunder in the air. Anyway it's the end of our Christmas Camp ; most of us will have vanished by to-morrow, shan't we ?"

"Yes," agreed Marjorie. She turned to look behind her at the ghostly array of tents and the black shadow of the forest. "Nearly every one starts to-morrow after a very early chota hazri, so as to put a march in before the sun gets overpowering. There won't be even any tents left by to-morrow."

"India is a quick-change artist, isn't she," agreed McDermot ; "it strikes one truer here than in sleepy old

England that saying of ours, here to-day and gone to-morrow."

" You aren't very cheerful," Marjorie half laughed.
" I believe the wretched thunder or whatever it is, has affected you too."

" Perhaps it has," he agreed, but that did no int any sort of a way settle the matter to his own mind.

CHAPTER XIX

“ Is it a gain to barter joy for shame,
Hope for remorse, desire for sated lust,
To prove that love is but an empty name,
To grasp at happiness and find it dust ? ”

THE Hamiltons’ tent was in darkness as Gerald and Esther entered, but Shahjahan, who had been propped against the centre pole waiting their coming, rose quickly to his feet and started lighting the lamps. He had hardly lit one before Gerald stopped him.

“ That will do, Shahjahan.” Something in his voice caused the bearer to turn and look at him. “ Leave the lamps alone and get out.”

It was explicit enough, yet Shahjahan found himself incapable of obeying at once ; he stood still instead and went on staring. Esther had dropped into the nearest chair and sat very straight and stiff, her hands in front of her, her eyes wide and unseeing. Gerald stood near her, his back to Shahjahan, but as he realized that his order had not yet been obeyed he turned swiftly and Shahjahan knew that he had never seen his master really angry before.

“ Get out ; didn’t you hear me ? ” Gerald repeated. His words this time were tense with anger and Shahjahan went.

Then Gerald turned to Esther. Such hot fierce words lay ready on his tongue with which to hurt her and make her feel ashamed, and behind them his heart ached with a throbbing, maddening pain which was driving all tenderness or reason from his mind. In the end, however, he choked back his anger ; there instinct came to his aid, and the fact that he was essentially a well-bred, self-restrained Englishman.

" Well," he said at last, " have you anything to explain to me, Esther, anything to say, that would make things easier for me to understand ? "

Esther lifted her eyes to his for a moment, as if what she read there had answered some question she had been about to put ; she looked away again quickly, and her face stiffened into an impassive mask of indifference.

" Nothing," she answered dully.

" Nothing ? " repeated Gerald ; he moved in front of her. " Nothing ? You can sit there and answer like that after what has happened ? Good God, Esther," his voice was growing thick with all the anger he was trying so hard to keep in check. " Don't you in the very least understand what this evening has meant to me ; haven't you the slightest feeling for me, or apart from that, any sense of decency in your heart ? "

" I suppose not," Esther answered. She was curiously immovable. " I don't understand myself, what would be the use of trying to explain to you ? Only"—her indifference broke a little, she looked up at him, " it isn't all my fault," she asserted ; " there is something outside me, or inside me, that is stronger than I am ; I can't fight it."

" You don't want to, you mean." Gerald spoke

bitterly and he moved away from her. "It's damnable that you should own yourself attracted by a man like that. I suppose you would call it attraction, wouldn't you? I can't tell you—if I could I suppose it would only be a waste of time—how unspeakably repugnant the whole idea is to me."

"You knew about it before you married me," said Esther; she was pulling off her gloves, her head was bent.

"Yes, I knew about it then," Gerald went on, "but I didn't know you. I thought, heaven help me, I thought, you were so young, so pure, that the hateful evil of the man was unseen by you, and that his position, his colour even, and the fact that the rest of us were all a bit down on him, made you sorry for him, threw a sort of glamour round him. I don't know what to think now; I can't forget what you told me about yourself in London; this wretched business is driving me mad, for you can't really love this—native—can you?"

Esther had no answer for his frantic doubt. "I don't know," she answered; there was something dazed in her repetition of the words. "I have never been either young or pure, Gerald; perhaps I have never been any of the things you imagined me to be." She stood up slowly, her eyes turned to where a faint glimpse of purple sky showed through the tent opening. "Perhaps," she went on, her voice level and toneless, "I am really evil all through as you are thinking me at this moment, and it would be better for both of us if you could get angry enough to kill me now; do you think you could?"

Her eyes came back to his. Gerald flushed hotly.

"Don't be a fool," he spoke curtly; "it is rather bad style to say that kind of thing, and it hurts me, though I

don't suppose that will affect you much. God, how you have hurt me too." The colour had died from his face leaving it white and strained. "I wonder if you will ever realize how much I gave you, how much my life has been built round yours. You have meant, since I knew you, and before I suppose, just everything to me. I couldn't kill you, Esther, I can't even kill my love for you." His voice broke abruptly, rage and hurt pride were swamped in a passion of disappointment ; he was very little more than a boy and for the moment he knew himself to be perilously near a breakdown.

Esther watched him pass her to the tent opening. The quiet of the night outside, the glimpse of Shahjahan's waiting figure, helped him to pull himself together ; when he spoke next his voice was firmly under control again.

"I think I'll order the pony and go for a good long gallop," he said. "We will leave things till the morning, Esther ; we are neither of us game to discuss them now ; it was stupid of me to have begun it."

Esther made no answer, but she took a little step towards him which he did not notice, for already he had called to Shahjahan and was giving his order.

"Bring the pony round to the small tent," she heard him say, "and look sharp about it, it won't take me a minute to change."

Then without even looking back at her he turned towards his dressing-tent and disappeared.

Then Esther spoke, but the words, though they sounded in her ears like a shout were hardly above a whisper.

"Gerald, Gerald, don't leave me alone, not just for to-night." She tried to run after him, but her feet, so it

seemed to her, were weighted with lead ; she could not move ; so she stood and whispered her stupid unheard message to the empty tent.

The Bholpur camp was early astir next morning ; every one was departing, only the Hamiltons proposed to put in another day just to wind up things and Dr. Crow had elected to stay and keep them company ; he rather liked travelling with such an important personage as the Police Commissioner.

A good deal of noise and confusion is necessary in the striking of a camp ; no one had much time to think of other people or to notice who was absent and who present. Shahjahan, for instance, was the only person who knew that at ten o'clock his sahib had not returned from his ride, and that the memsahib had not so far called for her morning cup of tea, though the uproar going on all round must certainly have been sufficient to wake her. Her silence, however, did not very much perturb him ; he was not, as has been mentioned, particularly partial to Esther, but Gerald's prolonged absence was beginning to cause him some anxiety. Shahjahan had been with his sahib a good many years, and once or perhaps twice, after a big guest night, he had certainly had some little difficulty in persuading Gerald to go to bed peacefully, but last night his sahib had not been drunk, yet never had he seen him look, or act, as he had done, for he had thrown himself on to the pony's back and stuck his spurs ruthlessly into its sides, a proceeding most unusual for Gerald, and one that the pony objected to. No wonder Shahjahan was getting a little uneasy.

It was left to Marjorie however, to realize about half way through the morning that she had not so far seen

either Gerald or Esther. They could hardly have left, because, though one or two good-byes had without doubt been missed in the general excitement, they at any rate would certainly not go off without a farewell. They must therefore be taking a very late morning in bed, or else perhaps with the memory of last night before him Gerald was anxious for the rest of the guests to have departed before Esther should put in an appearance. In that case it was to be hoped that somebody had provided them with breakfast.

"Where is Gerald sahib's boy?" Marjorie asked her own discreet butler; "have you seen him this morning?"

"Yes," Joseph had seen him, but by this time Shahjahan, taking matters into his own hand, had sallied forth with the missing pony's sais to find his sahib, and was therefore not anywhere within call.

"I had better go across myself and find out what they are doing," decided Marjorie, and went.

The camp, even so early in the day as this, wore a singularly deserted and falling-to-pieces appearance. All the English guests, with their retinues of servants and ponies, had departed, the tents were one by one being levelled to the ground, Jack and Dr. Crow superintending the work. Marjorie paused a second in the young Hamiltons' outer tent before calling to them; she noticed Esther's long white gloves lying on the table and propped up beside them something that looked like a note. She hardly looked at it, but in passing she saw it was addressed in Esther's rather untidy writing to "Gerald." The fact gave her a little shock of surprise, but still no real doubt dawned on her, till after repeated

calls she pushed aside the dividing curtain between the two tents and entered the bedroom. It was quite empty. For a moment she stood still staring, then it occurred to her that after all the young couple had slipped off without bothering to see her or Jack. She was about to turn and go, rather hurt and a little angry at such an abrupt departure, when her eyes were caught by the fact that all the dressing-table things were still unpacked : Esther's evening cloak lay across the back of the chair, the bed had been unslept in, for the mosquito nets were untouched. Like a flash Marjorie remembered the note she had seen outside and a great fear descended on her. Without waiting to investigate any further she turned and hurried out to find Jack.

"I expect it is all right," Jack reassured her at the end of her report. "Gerald has gone for an early morning ride, Crow and I found out that at the stables ; he has been out some time but I expect he will be back any moment now, it's getting hot."

"But Esther?" Marjorie repeated. "She hasn't gone for a ride. Jack, can't you see what I am afraid of? I know something dreadful has happened."

"It's rum, certainly," Jack agreed, "but let's wait till Gerald arrives ; he may have some explanation."

But Gerald when he did arrive was incapable of giving any explanations, or even of answering any questions. His coming was heralded by the sais, who a little later in the day rode into the camp on a sore-pressed, badly gored pony. He and Shahjahan, he informed the sahib-logue, had found the chota Hamilton sahib lying dead under the trees at the edge of the forest. He had apparently been swept off the back of the pony by the low-

growing branches, and the animal, once free from those maddening spurs, had come back to graze quietly beside the body. There Shahjahan and the sais had found them, and Shahjahan had stayed to guard his sahib while the sais returned to tell the camp.

A rough stretcher was hastily made and Crow and Jack started out at once.

"Keep as brave as you can, old lady," Jack said to Marjorie in parting; "after all he mayn't be dead, that sais has always been an unutterable fool."

To Crow he said as they cantered away, "All the same he must have been mad or drunk, that brother of mine. Did you see the pony's flanks. They were raw where the spurs had been rubbed in."

"Yes," agreed Crow. For once his eyeglass appeared to be of no use to him. "I am afraid things look black, Hamilton."

Gerald, however, was not dead; he was suffering, so Dr. Crow decided after a brief examination, from bad concussion, having landed heavily on the outstanding root of the tree whose branches had caused his downfall. Luckily those same branches had shaded him to a certain extent from the unfriendly sun, so things were not as bad as they might otherwise have been had sunstroke been added to the danger.

"He will be ill some time, I am afraid," Crow announced as he rode with Jack behind the litter, "but I have every hope of pulling him through. Shan't be able to move him for at least three weeks though and we will have to wire for a nurse."

That was the comforting knowledge given to Marjorie as she stood waiting to receive them. Gerald was alive,

that was all she cared about, and until the nurse arrived she had sufficient to do in looking after him without having much time to waste on thinking of Esther. Later on in the evening though Jack fetched her away from the patient.

"There is something we three have to discuss and settle before the nurse comes," he said to her. "Crow says Shahjahan is quite capable of sitting by Gerald for a bit."

In the outer tent he turned to her, and without any further words he handed her a letter which she recognized as being the one she had seen lying beside Esther's gloves.

"Read it," he said, "it almost explains itself."

Marjorie unfolded the note with stiff fingers. She was conscious, as she read the hastily scrawled words, of a wave of hatred against the woman who had written them.

"It is no use looking for me, Gerald," Esther had written. "I am going of my own free will into a life in which you can have no place or part. You said to-night that you could not even kill your love for me. I am doing it for you. You will not love me after this, but will you at least believe that with you I leave all that there was of goodness in my heart? I am going with Ishaq Khan."

Marjorie looked up as she finished reading the note.

"Have you both read this?" she asked. Jack nodded, meeting her eyes gravely, and Dr. Crow moved a little uneasily.

"The bird has been swallowed," he said; "it is a pity; at one time it appeared to me she had been saved."

Worry and anxiety about Gerald had pushed all other

thoughts from Mrs. Hamilton's head ; she had forgotten his parable about the bird and the snake.

"What are you talking about ?" she asked, "what bird ? And anyway haven't you read the letter ? Don't you see what she has done for Gerald ?"

"Yes, I have read it," Dr. Crow admitted. He paused a moment picking up a small miniature of Esther that stood on the table next him. "I was thinking just then," he went on, "not so much of the brother-in-law as of her. What will she make of life now, I wonder ?"

Mrs. Hamilton moved impatiently. "Does that matter ?" she asked ; her voice was singularly hard. Dr. Crow put down the picture and looked across at her ; there was something like disappointment in his glance. "At any rate," Mrs. Hamilton continued, "it is surely outside the question at present. What are we going to do about it ?" She looked at Jack.

For a second he hesitated, then he glanced at Crow, but the doctor's eyes were lowered ; he was busy polishing his eyeglass.

"We have thought it out, Crow and I," Jack begun abruptly, "and we have fixed on a plan that we think is the best. It sounds a little mad, but we think we can make it feasible. We are going to give out that she died very suddenly of cholera. It will sound quite possible, and we stand together all three in this. Burial is a quick necessity after cholera. We had to bury her at once without waiting for any ceremony. Gerald is of course off his head with grief, that is how his accident occurred, Crow can explain that to the nurse."

Mrs. Hamilton had to moisten her lips before she could speak. "What of the servants ?" she asked.

"They will talk among themselves," Jack admitted. "In a case of this sort, where there is a native concerned, it will go no further."

"And what of Gerald?" The hardness had gone from Mrs. Hamilton's voice; it sounded troubled. "What if he won't let it rest at that? You know how much he loved her, how obstinate he is."

Jack's eyes narrowed; this affair had touched very near the family honour; he was full of resentment against the girl who had thus dealt with their name.

"If the worst comes to the worst," he said, "Gerald shall be told the same lie as the rest of the world. The woman is dead in any case to him, even if she wanted to come back, and I doubt if she ever will. Crow agrees with me in this, don't you?" he glanced again at the doctor.

"I think," said the little man carefully, "that for his sake and for your sakes the lie is certainly best. You know practically how he will take the truth, and if he attempts anything in the way of getting her back, it is bound to be unpleasant. For her sake, well—" his eyes moved from Hamilton's uncompromising face to Mrs. Hamilton's bent head, for Marjorie had sat down by the table and for the moment had hidden her face in her hands. "She hardly counts, does she?" he asked.

"That is just it," Hamilton spoke quickly; "nothing that we can do will wipe this out. She is as good as dead."

"Yes," agreed the Doctor, "as good as dead." His eyes remained on Mrs. Hamilton. Lifting her head suddenly she met them, and the blood flew to her pale cheeks.

She stood up abruptly, facing her husband.

"Jack," she said, "you can't do it; don't you see you can't do it. How could we leave her there; how could we lie, and lie to a love like his? It would be terrible, it would be wrong, wrong." Her voice broke, she put out her hands impetuously.

Dr. Crow's eyeglass fell. He was glad, to the very bottom of his heart he was glad that Mrs. Hamilton had not fallen from his high ideal of her. Jack took his wife's hands in his and answered her gently.

"You don't understand, Marjorie; after all she went of her own free will and she is probably quite happy where she is. And what would be the use of Gerald fighting this out with Ishaq Khan? It is a crime, of course, to run off with some one else's wife, but a crime only punishable in the Divorce Court. Does Gerald want a thing like this dragged through the Divorce Courts?"

"No, oh no, but there must be some other way. Dr. Crow agrees with me, I am sure; he does not think we ought to desert the girl." She turned eagerly towards the other man.

Dr. Crow leant forward to flick his cigarette ash off. "I think," he decided gravely, "we had better stick to the lie." Then he stood up and his eyes met Mrs Hamilton's.

"But." Surprise sounded in her voice, she took an involuntary step towards him. "I thought—you seemed—Oh, I don't understand it all." Her hands fell away. "You must do what you think best, Jack. I can only leave it at that."

She turned and went quickly from the tent. Hamilton looked across at Dr. Crow.

" You think I am taking the right course, don't you ? " he asked.

" Quite the most sensible one," Crow answered.
" Mrs. Hamilton will agree with us in a day or two ; she has a very true heart, therein lies the present trouble."

In the inner tent Marjorie stood looking down at Gerald's unconscious face and figure. The sight was pushing aside the slight feeling of pity for Esther she had experienced in the other room.

" Jack is right," she whispered finally, " she is dead. She must be dead."

Then suddenly she shivered, putting up her hands to her eyes as if to shut out some unpleasant sight. Perhaps it was the memory of the picture of a mesmerised bird evoked by Dr. Crow which she had just remembered.

CHAPTER XX

“ The hope I dreamed of was a dream,
Was but a dream ; and now I wake
Exceeding comfortless, worn and old,
For a dream’s sake.”

MISS DUNCAN, the nurse summoned by Dr. Crow, arrived next morning. She was a cheerful capable, Scotch girl, who very much took over the reins of government as soon as she arrived. She was singularly incurious about her patient, being too interested in the case to worry much over the personality, and she took her orders from Dr. Crow and carried them out very thoroughly. Gerald had to be kept very quiet, the tent darkened as much as possible. He was for the most part unconscious, but sometimes towards the end of the second week, for hours at a time he would lie on his back, hands pulling and twitching at the sheets, eyes bright and intent, staring at something no one else could see. Sometimes he would cry out loud, “ Esther, Esther,” and Nurse Duncan would lean over him trying in vain to soothe the restless hands, to bring comfort to the tortured mind.

“ Poor dear young man,” she would whisper in an aside to Marjorie, “ it is very tragic, now isn’t it ? and to think of her he loves cold and dead.”

For, of course, Nurse Duncan had heard the story,

and it had not seemed in any sort of way strange to her. Sudden death is an event of almost daily occurrence in India, the present circumstances made it just a little sadder ; that was all, and if she was sometimes a little surprised at Mrs. Hamilton's unsympathetic attitude towards the dead wife, she put it down more or less to jealousy ; Mrs. Hamilton was so devoted to her brother-in-law it was easy to account for it in that way.

At last, towards the end of the second week, Gerald woke one morning, as the doctor had all along hoped he might, sane and in his right mind. The wakening, as was but natural, came slowly ; he lay for some long time on his back, his eyes wide open, but making no sound or movement. Nurse Duncan flitted in and out of his range of vision noiselessly, she was tidying the room. He placed her after a time, though at first her unfamiliar face and figure brought the pucker of a frown to his forehead. She was a sick nurse ; well then, some one must be ill. Who was it, he wondered vaguely for a minute, then sharp on the thought realized it must be himself. Why had he been ill, where was he ? Slowly, very slowly, the mists cleared off his brain ; he remembered—he had quarrelled with Esther, he had ordered the pony and gone out. Esther, where was Esther ?

"Nurse," he called sharply, though his voice was hardly above a whisper, "Nurse." He made an effort to sit up.

Nurse Duncan was beside him in a moment, and at the same time over her shoulder she nodded to Shah-jahan who had been waiting just within the tent door to go and fetch Mr. Hamilton.

"So now," she said, laying a quieting hand on

Gerald's, "you are awake, but you must not sit up right away; you have been rather ill, you know."

"How long have I been ill?" Gerald asked. "Where are we; how do you come to be here?"

"Well, I am a nurse," she explained cheerfully, "and this is your brother's tent. You have been ill three weeks now, so you can't expect to be well all in a hurry, can you?"

Gerald's eyes wandered from hers; he was feeling weak and giddy; sleep was surging to his brain again. But before unconsciousness swept over him he must ask, he must find out about Esther.

"Where is Jack, my brother?" he asked.

Nurse Duncan beckoned to some one behind her and slipped aside herself, but not far; she had anxious eyes on her patient's face.

"He is awfully weak," she whispered as Jack took her place; "tell him as quick as you can, there is no use trying to put him off."

Jack leant over the bed; no doubt was in his mind now as to what he should say; his eyes met the eager questioning in Gerald's gravely.

"I am here, old chap," he said; "it is good to have you recognize one again."

Gerald looked up at him. "Esther," he asked; his hands moved feebly, "where's Esther?"

His brother bent a little nearer.

"Gerald, old boy," he said. "It has got to be faced like a man. Esther was taken ill with cholera the night of your accident. She is dead." His voice dropped a little on the word.

Gerald echoed it dully. "Dead," he said, "dead."

Nurse Duncan moved quickly round to the other side of the bed, slipped one hand under his pillow and held something in a medicine glass to his lips.

"Drink," her voice broke the spell of tragedy, "you must drink this."

And Gerald, instinctively obedient to the note of command in her voice, drank. Then his eyes closed and wave upon wave of sleep surged against his brain. He was falling, he felt, through vast spaces; nothing mattered very much if they would leave him alone and not wake him, let sleep just lap him round. Nurse Duncan whispered to Jack Hamilton to go.

"He'll sleep again for a bit," she explained, "but you might ask Dr. Crow to look in, he had better be here when my patient wakes."

And Gerald slept; presently the heaviness lifted a little, dreams stirred across his brain. He and Esther were together in the gardens at home and Esther was laughing; then, though he turned and held her with all his strength, she slipped from him, and he could no more see or feel her, but still he could hear her laughter. Suddenly the sound of it turned to tears, and so moved him to anger, because he could not reach or comfort her, that he woke, and waking, full knowledge rushed upon him and he had to hold his breath on the cry that rose to his lips. Esther was dead; he would never touch her or see her, or hear her again. Esther was dead.

Meanwhile the news of Esther's sudden death and Gerald's illness permeated very slowly to the outside world. Jack delayed for one thing in sending the notices to the papers, Marjorie made no pretence of writing

any one on the subject. The tragic story leaked out really from Nurse Duncan, at least it was through her that the Bholpur people first heard of it, for Miss Duncan, as it happened had been a co-worker and was a bosom friend of Miss Lyall's.

Miss Lyall received Nurse Duncan's letter containing the news one afternoon about a fortnight after Nurse Duncan had taken over the case, and took it down with her to the club to read while she was waiting for the men to come up from tennis. All the English residents of Bholpur assembled at the Club House every evening, the men to play, first tennis and then billiards, and Miss Lyall, solitary representative of the female sex as she was, to look on and praise their efforts. On this particular evening however she brought rather a tragic face into their midst.

"I have had such depressing, terrible news," she informed them. Miss Lyall was always keenly sensitive to the tragedy of other people's lives.

"What is it?" asked Brown; "how dare people be depressing at the beginning of the cold weather."

"It makes it worse," fluttered little Miss Lyall, "because I know you and Mr. McDermot were such friends of the people. I am afraid it will be a great shock to you; perhaps it will be easier if I give you the letter to read."

She handed part of Nurse Duncan's bulky epistle to McDermot, and he and Brown read it together.

"It is tragedy as you say," remarked Brown sombrely at the conclusion. McDermot said nothing; he was slowly folding the letter up again and his brow was knit in a frown.

"What a hell this country is to some people," Brown

went on. "Cholera too ; Oh, damn it all ! " he turned aside brusquely and strode to the window, forgetting for the moment to apologize to Miss Lyall for his outburst of language.

"Who has died of cholera, and where ? " asked Donaldson ; he lifted his attention from the chalking of his billiard cue.

"It is young Mrs. Hamilton," McDermot answered, his voice level. "She must have been taken ill the night of the ball, and died next morning."

"The poor young husband went off his head with grief," Miss Lyall supplemented from Nurse Duncan's letter. "And has been dangerously ill ever since, in fact he is only just beginning to pull round."

Donaldson's healthy face had gone a little white. "Good Lord ! " he said, "and cholera too. How has the news been so long in reaching us ? You would have thought the servants would have had wind of it before now."

"Yes," agreed McDermot ; the frown still lingered on his face. "It is certainly odd, but there it is. All this happened two weeks ago ; in this letter the nurse talks of moving young Hamilton to Shillong next day."

Brown turned suddenly from the window. "I am going home," he stated somewhat fiercely, "no billiards for me to-night. I don't feel like them. And thank the Lord," he went on as they stood on the club steps waiting for the various dog carts, "that to-morrow is mail day. If no one has written to me from the old country, I shall run amuck and insist upon reading every one else's letters."

"There will always be the papers," Donaldson ob-

served gloomily. He was thinking that the mail would bring a letter from the girl at home who was waiting and counting the days till she could come out to him, and how in the name of Providence could he bring her to a country where this sort of thing could happen. Supposing she were to die like that ; the thought tortured him all night.

Dr. Brown on the other hand, as one much used to death and the tragedies that must attend on death, was able to a certain extent to forget the incident that had cast such a sudden gloom over their evening, and looked up with almost blank surprise when McDermot reopened the subject across the dinner-table.

"Brown," the Resident said suddenly—they had been more than usually silent over the meal—"I am sure, though for the life of me I can't explain why, that there is more in this than meets the eye."

"More in what ?" asked Brown uninterestedly helping himself to an orange.

"This Hamilton affair," explained McDermot. "I expect you will look upon me as insane if I voice my views, but I can't get away from the idea that there is much more behind this than we have been allowed to hear."

"Humph!" Brown glanced up from his orange. "You are generally sane enough," he remarked: "Do you mind unravelling a little of what is in your brain, McDermot; I might tumble to your meaning better."

"Well, perhaps, if I talk I shall see the absurdity of my thoughts." The Resident sat back in his chair and lit a cigar. "It was just before the Hamilton wedding," he said between puffs of smoke, "and somewhere about

the time of Ishaq Khan's sudden return from Shillong that I first had a letter from Mrs. Hamilton senior about this affair. Mrs. Jack Hamilton and I are very old friends, Brown, as I think you know."

"Yes," agreed the doctor, "though how you two get on has always been a puzzle to me. For Mrs. Hamilton, as I know her, has a hatred for India and all things Indian which I should have thought would have rubbed up against some of your pet theories."

"Has she?" asked McDermot; he looked a little surprised. "She has never admitted that to me. But you may be right; it would account anyway for the bitterness with which she wrote on this particular occasion. It appeared that Shillong at that time was being thrilled, and at the same time scandalized, by a too ardent flirtation which Ishaq Khan was carrying on with a Miss Williams, the girl who afterwards married young Hamilton. Mrs. Jack Hamilton wrote very lengthily upon the subject, accusing Ishaq Khan of having gained some occult influence over the girl. In fact she suggested hypnotism, and wished to hear from me whether such a charge had ever been voiced in connexion with him before. Now I do not trust our friend the Prince, Brown; and as Mrs. Hamilton's letter arrived practically on the heels of the affair of that white woman in the harem, I was more than a little inclined to regard him with suspicion. One cannot, however, accuse a man, even if he is a native, of unholy practices just because he succeeds in attracting white women. To us, as to all respectable people of either colour, the idea is repugnant, loathsome, but that Ishaq Khan had this influence and used it, the fact of that first white

woman went far to prove. Then came the news of the engagement, and forthcoming marriage of Miss Williams. I told Ishaq Khan of it at dinner that night—do you remember the occasion?—for a reason of my own. I wanted to watch him and draw my own conclusions. You, Brown, were driven to remark on the way home that you had noticed something was up with him."

"I noticed that he hated you," Brown admitted, "but that is nothing new. He hates, as I have remarked before, the whole bang shoot of us."

"Exactly. It is very improbable then, that he loves the white women who fall into his hands."

"Oh that," Brown frowned expressively, "surely does not need explaining, and I would rather you did not bring the word—love—into it, McDermot."

"You would describe it anyway, as an attraction of a sort. Well, I feel, it is an impression that the man has given me, that instead of its being attraction, it is hate, cold-blooded, poisonous hate. Don't you see what that means?" The Resident's ordinary calm left him, he got up abruptly and came across to the other man. "He takes them, the women, weak enough, base enough, call it what you will, to fall under his power, and on them he wreaks the passion of his hate. In two ways it satisfies him, the lust of cruelty—you don't know, Brown, how far that is developed in some of these people—the joy of degrading what we white men hold so dear, our women."

Dr. Brown sat back and stared. "Good Lord, McDermot," he remonstrated. "I believe you have gone a little mad. What on earth have you evolved these blood curdling theories out of?"

McDermot pulled forward a chair and sat down again. The punkah swung lazily above their heads, a boy came out from behind the screen to see whether he could clear away the things only to vanish back again at a wave of McDermot's hand.

"I know it sounds mad." The Resident resumed more calmly, his cigar had gone out; he paused to re-light it. "Did you ever question Miss Lyall about her one visit to the harem?" he asked.

"No," Brown admitted. "I gathered it was a subject she did not wish to talk about."

"Perhaps. Anyway she could have told you of what one white woman had been through before she died in Ishaq Khan's harem, but like me, it could only have been what she imagined, what guessed at, the dead tell no tales."

"That is just it," suggested Dr. Brown with an air of relief. "What has all this got to do with the present tragedy since Mrs. Gerald Hamilton is dead."

McDermot's eyes met his for a second. "If she is dead," he corrected softly.

"Look here," Brown pushed back his chair and stood up. "You are getting out of my depths, old man, and I shouldn't be surprised if on taking your temperature I was to find you a little feverish. Hadn't you better pack off to bed?" *

"No, wait;" McDermot rose too, he laughed a little at his friend's surmises. "Come out into the verandah, let me finish my tale. I am neither mad, nor feverish, but there are some things one cannot think of placidly." He broke off suddenly and turned to Brown. "I know the Hamiltons well," he said. "They are a very proud,

and self-contained people. If, oh I know it is a large if, but if anything has happened, if the girl has run off seemingly of her own free will, they wouldn't forgive her easily, and what better way for them to hush the matter up could there be than this of death ? ”

“ Look here, McDermot,” Brown shook him gently. “ You are just imagining impossibilities. How on earth do you think they could palm off a yarn of that sort on all India ? And even if all your ifs are ifs, what do you propose to do ? ”

“ I don’t know,” McDermot admitted. “ I suppose you would say it is no business of ours, but—well I have wanted to pull down the Palace and see things for myself ever since that other woman died—and now, perhaps I am a fool, but I would give more than my right hand to be of some use to her.”

He turned and went into his own room and Brown, having the verandah to himself, veered slowly round looking towards the forest where the Bholpur Palace showed up a blurred white mass amongst the trees.

“ Poor old McDermot,” he muttered ; his intent gaze appeared to bring some decision to his mind for, “ By Jove,” he volunteered aloud to the night and the stars, “ if there was the faintest shadow of truth in any of his ifs, for tuppence I’d pull down the whole beastly concern myself.”

CHAPTER XXI

“ One friend in that path shall be,
One to count night day for me,
Patient through the watches long,
Serving most with none to see.”—*Browning.*

GERALD'S way back to health was of necessity somewhat slow, though Dr. Crow had been able to pronounce him out of danger after the first week. There followed, however, long, weary days and black interminable nights, when, unless under an opiate, he would lie awake brooding and thinking about Esther, which in no way helped him in his convalescence. As Nurse Duncan said it was just that silent brooding they had to fight against more than anything else.

“ If he would only talk about her to any one,” she urged most particularly on Mrs. Hamilton, “ it would lighten his load, make things easier for him to bear, and help him to get well quicker than any amount of medicine.”

Marjorie accepted the hint in silence ; she would gladly have made her effort towards easing his mind, though to speak of Esther was not easy for her, but Gerald proved singularly intractable. Perhaps the instinctive knowledge that Marjorie had never loved Esther drove him back on himself ; he could not speak of her, he had asked for no details of her death, he seemed to want none. As a matter of fact the events that had preceded

his accident stirred in his mind as very blurred incidents ; he had been bitterly unhappy and he had quarrelled with Esther, he remembered that ; therein lay the tragedy of his silent thoughts, for he would never now be able to tell her how stupid had been his anger, or how unalterable his love. And death raised up such a barrier between his aching heart and the woman he had loved ; he threw himself against it again and again till its dumb resistance drove him mad and sometimes he almost prayed for forgetfulness.

At the end of the second week the Hamiltons and Dr. Crow took their patient up to Shillong. Nurse Duncan saw him over the journey and then said farewell. There was really nothing more that she could do for Gerald and she left Shahjahan in close and indefatigable attendance on his master. Shahjahan had been through a good deal since the night of his sahib's accident. He had sat for long hours crouching at the foot of Gerald's bed ; not even the nurse's stern discipline had been able to dislodge him from there, and during those hours he had heard his sahib call and call again for the white men who had so ruthlessly left him. Now it is to be remembered that to Shahjahan conscience was embodied in his love for his sahib ; the white men he did not care for at all, but he knew something—for he was an old man and had lived his life before he became a servant—of the love a man can bear to a woman though the woman be thoroughly unworthy. Therefore as he sat and listened through those night watches, Shahjahan had taken an oath that if his sahib required the woman back again, he should have her at all costs. Shahjahan had his own clues and a certain knowledge to guide him,

Then had come the bewildering behaviour of the other sahibs, the hastily conceived mock burial, the bond of secrecy which all the servants had taken upon themselves. Verily the ways of the white man were un-understandable. Shahjahan bided his time and purpose ; he would see with his own eyes whether his sahib was party to the plot or not.

An Oriental when dealing with a European instinctively moves by caution ; a native never asks a direct question, just as he never answers with a direct truth. Shahjahan watched and listened and waited, but since Gerald was so strangely silent he perforce did not gather much. Then one evening as together they sat out in the verandah, Gerald, lying in a long chair, Shahjahan squatting on the steps at his feet, the first move in the game of diplomacy was taken.

Gerald had a book, but he had not been reading for a long time ; the little puzzled frown had gathered between his eyes—it was rarely absent from them these days—he had grown very suddenly from a cheerful, light-hearted boy, to a somewhat morose man. Shahjahan took it upon himself after a discreet cough to break in on his sahib's meditation.

"The huzoor is nearly well now," he ventured ; "when do we rejoin the regiment ? "

"Next week, I suppose," answered Gerald ; "you are tired of our long leave, Shahjahan ? "

"Nay," Shahjahan spoke slowly his eyes hungry on the white face. "But it weighs on my heart that the huzoor is not glad of the life the gods have given back to him ; he cares no more for the regiment, for polo, for cricket,"

The English names were pronounced quaintly. Gerald smiled; in a way he was touched by the old man's anxiety.

"I don't know about not caring," he answered; then his eyes wandered back to the far off snow-clad hills, and when he went on speaking it was more to himself than to his listener. "I shall have to pull myself together," he said, "but when there is something in one's life that one has cared all the world for, and it is suddenly taken away, Shahjahan, the world seems beastly empty."

Shahjahan's English was not very extensive, but some of Gerald's meaning he did appear to gather for he nodded his head.

"There are other women, huzoor," he suggested. It was impossible to take offence at his words, they were so gravely said, and Gerald answered in the same mood, dropping back into the vernacular.

"No, Shahjahan, do you remember you said to me once when I was chaffing you about something, 'Huzoor, my wife died when I was a lad of nineteen; I buried all women in her grave.' Well, it is like that with me; I too, have buried all I shall ever love."

Shahjahan stood up abruptly. "Huzoor," he said, with what must have appeared as a quick change of ideas, "if it meets with your comfort I should wish to apply for one month's leave when we go from here."

"Leave," repeated Gerald; he stared up at the man. "What an extraordinary old buster you are. One moment weeping over me and the next wanting to leave me. What do you want leave for?"

"Huzoor," Shahjahan spoke blandly; in that one

moment his mind had been made up, the way had been mapped out before him. "It is expedient that I visit the home of my fathers. I have procured a good boy who will make a most excellent servant in my absence, and who is a man of my own family, therlyefore the huzoor may trust him."

"Oh, well, if you must go, you must." Gerald was conscious of feeling a little hurt. "See to it that the new man thoroughly understands my work though."

Shahjahan salaamed gravely and took his silent way off the verandah, just as Marjorie's rickshaw drew up at the foot of the steps.

"Shahjahan is taking a month's leave," said Gerald still in a rather aggrieved tone of voice as Marjorie came up to him. "It seems a bit inconsiderate of him, doesn't it? just at this time, but you really never know where you have these natives."

"He has been so good all through your illness," Marjorie answered; she paused on her way to her room. "I don't believe he has slept once during the past three weeks, perhaps he feels fagged out."

Gerald's face cleared. "What a confounded nuisance I have made of myself," he said. "I wonder you aren't all dead sick of me."

"Dear boy," Marjorie came back quickly and stooped to kiss the top of his head. "We have kept you, that is all that really matters."

So Shahjahan took leave and went to spend it with a relation by marriage who conveniently had his dwelling in one of the smallest side streets of Bholpur. The relation in question, a sleek, mild-mannered grain merchant was, to begin with, rather suspicious of the

motives which could have caused this sudden visit. Under the circumstances, however (his wife was Shahjahan's sister and a masterful, shrill-voiced woman to boot), he made himself as amiable as possible, and was more than willing to dole out the scandal of the Palace if that was what his brother-in-law was requiring. Shahjahan therefore in the course of his inquiries learnt many small details as to Prince Ishaq Khan's domestic affairs, the seditious faction, the failure of Ra Chandra, and so forth. Incidentally, Hira Lal was not a true patriot in Ra Chandra's sense of the word.

" 'Tis foolishness they talk," he confided to Shahjahan. " At a given signal we are to rise and wipe out the British Raj. To what purpose say I, so that the Prince and such like men may rule us and grind us under their heels. Give me in preference the English Raj ; they do not understand us, that is without doubt true, it makes them the easier to hoodwink, one tells what lies one pleases to the white folk."

" Yes," agreed Shahjahan ; " yet they are not all fools, brother, and there is justice in their dealings."

" Of a truth that is so," struck in a ponderously fat man, a far off relation of Hira Lal's, " and as for the Prince, should his heel be upon us, there is Narrayan to stand as living witness of what his justice will be."

A certain shade of gloom descended on the gathering, for there were present two or three neighbours who had looked in for the pleasure of hearing the questions of the day discussed with a newcomer.

" Aye, there is Narrayan," another of them repeated.

Shahjahan looked round ; he was quick to notice the shadow of restraint,

"Who is this Narrayan?" he asked. "What of him?"

Hira Lal took upon himself to answer. "'Tis ill luck to speak of such misfortune," he said, directing a frown at the first offender, "but this is the tale. This same Narrayan was water-carrier to the women's quarters in the Palace, a likely lad but ever anxious to pry, and of an exceedingly soft heart towards women. In those days, there was a white woman in the Palace, a slave brought by the Prince from the land of the white folk, and it would seem that tiring of the life in the harem—you know well, brother," he nodded at Shahjahan, "the freedom of the white women, she desired to fly the place. Then too, she was ill, and if Narrayan—poor fool, he could speak in those days—spake truth, there was some ill-treatment. Without doubt the Prince tired of her and there were many jealous hearts in the harem." He paused and sucked at his pipe amidst an impatient silence.

"We had it from the servants at the Residency," he went on presently. "It seems the woman wrote a letter and sent it by Narrayan to the resident sahib, then—"

He seemed about to pause again but Shahjahan prompted him.

"Then," he asked, "what happened? Hira Lal, thou art a slow talker."

Hira Lal glanced across at him. "The woman was dead ere the white folk got to her," he said, "and Narrayan—one of these days I will show thee Narrayan, Shahjahan, as Hussein has said he is a lesson of the justice of the Prince, that makes me not anxious for this much talked-of change of Government."

"Narrayan," Shahjahan made a quick mental note. That was the man who should help him with his quest, provided he was still alive.

"Then he yet lives, this Narrayan?" He voiced his difficulty at once. "I should much like to meet him."

"Aye, he lives," answered one of the party who had not yet spoken, "there are worse things than death in the justice of the Prince."

This was greeted with nods of agreement and the gathering shortly after broke up, but as they departed the last speaker turned to Shahjahan.

"To-morrow," he said, "the priests feed the poor at the temple gate; thou mayst see Narrayan there if thou wishest."

Most decidedly Shahjahan wished; he was early on the scene of action next morning, and the fact that he had not been able to persuade Hira Lal to accompany him in no way depressed him. He had from the beginning decided that it would be no use taking that worthy into his confidence.

The small paved space at the door of the temple was already nearly full of a pushing, evil-smelling crowd of mendicants. Lame and blind, twisted bodies, horrible deformities and injuries, gathered together from many miles round, all professional beggars, and as such well fed despite their abject appearance, for there are few beggars so well off as the professional mendicant of India. Here a curse direct falls on them who refuse charity to the poor, and curses, though they may not be more effectual, are at any rate more feared in the East than in the West. Shahjahan stood on the outskirts for some time and watched the priests passing

backwards and forwards through the crowd, doling out rice to the outstretched hands. Which among all these score of ruffians was Narrayan, he wondered, and was about to put the question to one of his fellow lookers-on when suddenly he was aware of a hush that had fallen over the scene. With muttered curses the beggars drew to either side, leaving a cleared passage up to the temple door. Shahjahan leaned forward to see.

Up the path thus cleared a figure was advancing, practically it groped with long thin hands that searched and felt the way, while all the time, a wailing not loud, but unrecognizable as human, broke from the twisted mouth. The man had no eyes, Shahjahan realized with a shock of horror, but flaming, awful sockets with open sores where the eyes should have been.

Shahjahan felt suddenly ill, and could hardly control his voice sufficiently to ask of the man next him what in the name of Allah was the thing approaching.

The man questioned turned to stare in surprise. "Art a stranger to Bholpur?" he asked; then sudden hatred flamed into his face; he turned to spit on the ground. "It is named Narrayan," he explained, "and that is the justice of our Prince, the curse of God be on him."

"'Tis strange justice," remarked Shahjahan; the intense feeling of horror had passed; he was interested in his chance acquaintance who could voice such depths of hate towards the reigning Prince. "What have the white men to say to such dealings?"

The boy—Shahjahan could see now that his companion was little more—turned to him passionately. "What do they know or heed of what happens to the bazaar

folk?" he asked; "are we of as much value in their eyes as the dust that blows across their garden? The Prince," his voice dropped sullenly, "is their friend; will they believe our word against his?"

There was truth in the argument. Shahjahan knew that; his own quick brain was working out a plan. He put out a hand to detain the boy as he turned to go.

"You speak bitterly," he said, "and with truth, but I have knowledge of a wrong done by this same Prince to the white folk, that, let them once know of it and they will not forget. What say you, shall I tell my plan; am I right in thinking there is some wrong within your heart that cries for vengeance?"

Most of the throng had betaken themselves off by now. Shahjahan and his companion were comparatively alone; only the figure of Narrayan crouched at the gate of the temple. By his side squatted a small, fat girl, patient and oblivious of the horror so near her. She was evidently in charge of the man for now and then she would wave the flies from off his face or push aside a too curious dog.

Shahjahan's companion looked across to the squatting figures and back again. "You have spoken true," he said, "I care not who hears. My wrong is like unto the wrong of Narrayan, and one day—the gods being merciful to me—I will repay, it. But for you I can in no sort of way help you; get you to Narrayan, he cannot speak nor see but he can hear, and he knows the Palace well." He turned brusquely and shaking Shahjahan's hand off his arm hurried away.

Left to himself again Shahjahan contemplated the empty square; he was loth to have anything very much

to do with the hideous horror that sat slobbering in the sun, but on the other hand what the young man had just said was undoubtedly true, and if Shahjahan was to get within the Palace walls and gather the information he desired before he could safely act upon his knowledge, Narrayan was surely the person to get him there. He sauntered finally across to the object of his considerations and squatted down beside the pair.

"Misfortune kills the body but not the mind," he opened his discourse philosophically.

The twitching face turned to him and Shahjahan looked away hastily.

"Dost thou understand, O Unfortunate one?" he asked; "if my meaning be clear, it is but necessary to nod the head."

He blinked round to see the effect of that speech and Narrayan nodded at him distinctly, also he opened his mouth and displayed a raw cavity—the tongue had been cut off short.

"He cannot speak," explained the fat child stolidly

"I know." Shahjahan made a hasty movement with his hand; he did not wish to see any more. "Thou art his daughter, without doubt."

"Yes," the child asserted, "he has been like this for now it is eight months, and as yet he has to be led from place to place. He can talk so with his mouth;" she made strange sounds, "but they are difficult to understand if you know them not well."

"I will stay and talk to him awhile," said Shahjahan, "my heart bleeds for such suffering. Go you a little away."

The child obeyed docilely and Shahjahan's next words were purposely weighted with scorn.

"Men here call this thing that has been done to you, the justice of the Prince," he said. "I spit upon such justice." He did so somewhat violently.

The head jerked again.

"What of revenge?" asked Shahjahan. He put one hand on the man's arm; "we cannot talk here for people watch us; take me to your home. I have a plan which could do with your help as you with mine."

He waited anxiously to see how his plan carried. The man beside him shivered, his hands twitching; he was evidently undecided and afraid, then he turned those dreadful eye sockets to Shahjahan again, nodded his head and rose stiffly, one claw-like hand on the other's arm. The child ran up to them at once.

"Is it home?" she asked; "and does the stranger go with us?"

At a nod from the blind man, she jerked her head in a certain direction to Shahjahan and started off at a good brisk pace leading her father. Shahjahan followed silently; he had not quite made up his mind what course to pursue; from Narrayan at any rate he hoped to obtain information as to how to gain access to the harem, after that he would think out what was best to be done.

The child led them swiftly, and directly down a side turning at the back of the temple along a narrow foot-path that ran parallel to the Palace wall, and paused finally by a low-built straw-roofed hut standing under the shade of a monstrous peepul tree practically at the back gates of the Palace. A woman who had been kneading cow-dung cakes on the mud plateau in front

of the hut scrambled quickly to her feet at their approach, half veiling her face with the dirty rag that served her as a scanty covering.

The child shouted to her the information that Shahjahan was an important stranger who desired speech with her father, and the woman with a muttered word of welcome pushed the filth she had been working on to one side and vanished herself quickly into the shadow of the hut. The child followed suit, having first established her father in his accustomed seat, and Shahjahan found himself alone with this strange, awe-inspiring host. So the talking was to be done in the open ; he was rather glad of that ; there would be little chance for an eavesdropper and Shahjahan took care to keep his voice discreetly lowered, it could hardly carry to the woman inside.

Narayan was not by any means easy to convince ; he suffered from an unshakable faith in the Prince's power for finding out the most hidden transactions, and he had suffered to the full what the cost of being found out had entailed. What guarantee had Shahjahan, even if all his tales were true, that the white men could protect him against a further vengeance ? they had not done so before, yet Narayan had offended in the service of a white woman. He was naturally not inclined to risk much and Shahjahan's arguments had to be well and lengthily re-stated. Finally after much coercion he was moved to agree, by strange guttural sounds, and nods of his head. His little daughter should lead Shahjahan to the Garden Palace, in which place it was most probable Esther would be housed, since it was the abode for the favourite wife of the moment.

The child knew the way well having often accompanied her father when he was a water carrier to the harem, but having once brought him to the place she was to come away at once, not under any circumstances was she to be seen with Shahjahan ; they were to go after dark and Shahjahan was to find his own way out again. In return for such service Shahjahan was to pay over thirty rupees on the spot and give his promise that when the sahibs came to take their vengeance on the Prince, Narrayan's case should be mentioned.

Shahjahan came away on the whole well satisfied with his mission, though the parting with thirty rupees had not been expected, and on the way back to his brother-in-law's house, he had to stand aside in the ditch to allow the Resident's pony and trap to pass. Shahjahan was too busy with his thoughts to pay much attention to the incident, but the keen, blue eyes had rested on him and in that second McDermot had recognized him.

"It's the Gerald Hamilton's head man," he thought ; "what on earth can he be doing in Bholpur ?"

That night at dinner McDermot glancing up at Brown voiced a sudden decision that had come to him during the drive home.

"I shall take this week-end in the hills," he said ; "something is pulling me to Shillong."

"Lucky dog," grunted Brown ; "there are all sorts of things pulling me away from Bholpur, but I don't see much chance of gratifying the instinct. What about your ideas on the Hamilton question ?" he asked as an afterthought. "I hope they have worn thin and you aren't dashing off with that bee in your bonnet."

"In a way I suppose I am," McDermot admitted.

"I can't help it, Brown. I have got to find out for myself." He stood up; Brown rose too.

"Go to Shillong, by all means," he said. "Do you good and blow away the cobwebs. For a sane man you have been most absurdly obstinate on this subject."

McDermot laughed and there the matter was allowed to drop. He did not think it necessary in the face of Brown's attitude to add that he had that evening seen Shahjahan in the precincts of the Palace, for Brown would only think it another evidence of his madness that he should in any way connect the man's presence with the rest of the chain of happenings which were so slowly and surely tightening for him supposition into certainty.

CHAPTER XXII

"Nothing gives such a blow to friendship as the detecting another in an untruth; it strikes at the root of our confidence ever after."—*Hazlitt.*

McDERMOT went to Shillong the next day as he had abruptly made up his mind to do. Quite what he expected to find out during his visit he did not define even to himself, and he had no further conversation with Brown on the matter. The latter appeared to forget entirely the discussion of the night before, and during breakfast was wrapped up in the fact that the English mail had brought him two letters.

"Skating and hunting," he groaned half way through the second epistle. "Man, do you realize that? And here we are in this small portion of inferno with the sun hot enough to roast a potato in."

"It is a good sun," McDermott admitted placidly; "you wait till you are a retired buster of two or three years' standing, and you will find your old bones and the bleared old eyes of you simply aching and straining for the sight and feel of it."

"Rot," breathed Brown. "My idea of Hell is a sun nearer and larger than this one, and as for the ordinary Biblical known spot, well—you and I, after ten years of this, will require blankets if we get sent there."

McDermot laughed. " You sin your mercies," he said, " look at this same abused sun, how it flings gold over everything."

Brown grunted and returned to the last page of his letter. " It's all very well for you to talk," he added as a bitter afterthought, " you will be feasting your eyes on the snows of the Himalayas to-morrow, and can afford to be generous to Bholpur to-day. Besides, the prospect of playing tennis three days running with the Black Beetle is enough to depress any one." He rose gloomily and departed with his English mail to his side of the house.

McDermot wrote a short note and sent it over to the Palace, expressing his regret at not having seen the Prince the day before, and mentioning the fact of his departure to the hills for a day or two. Then, the Residential affairs being handed over to Donaldson for the time being, and accompanied by the faithful Rutna and a hastily packed bag, the Resident started.

The small hill railway to Shillong takes a very winding way up the steep inclines of the mountain range. The train advances by fits and starts, and much fussy grunting on the part of the engine. At Tara station, which is the last stop before Shillong, it comes to a long stand-still. Here the third-class passengers unpack themselves from the crowded *carriges* and draw up in a line along the platform to be medically inspected for plague and other such fell diseases which belong by well-established rights to the plains, but which Government is always doing its best to keep out of the hill resorts. The natives take this precautionary Government act with their usual placid unconcern. They understand not in the very

least why the officials should wish to look at their tongues and take their temperatures, but they accept the fact with unquestioning obedience. One undoubted fact the British rule has established in India, and that is faith—faith, and a blind trust in their English rulers, which no amount of seditious upheaval has as yet eradicated from the hearts of the people.

McDermot, emerging from his carriage to watch proceedings and stretch his legs, chanced upon rather a pathetic evidence of this truth. A very old man, hailing, as his turban proclaimed, from the plains of Rajpatana, had taken his stand with the rest of the third-class passengers along the platform. That he was bewildered and confused by the proceedings was evident from the harassed expression on his wrinkled old face. Probably he had never even taken a railway journey before, certainly he had never been plague inspected ; but to ask the why and the wherefore of things from any of his fellow-travellers, who were neither Rajpats nor as old as he, was quite beneath his dignity. Therefore he drew himself in line and awaited events. McDermot pausing in his walk caught the old fellow's eye and salaamed him, for he had a soft corner in his heart for Rajpats, and at that moment the doctor came up. To the doctor the affair had grown so much a matter of course, that it needed no explanation, by a sign he made the old man open his mouth and thrust in the thermometer, placing his finger on the wrist meanwhile to count the pulse. The Rajpat gave one agitated fluttering glance at McDermott—" What do I with this thing in my mouth ? " his eyes said as plain as words. A thermometer was unknown to him : with a blind trust and a pathetic hope

that the thing would not make him sick—he had, as he knew only too well, an easily turned stomach—the Rajpat started to chew the bulb.

McDermot had been a little amused by the poor old man's evident fright, but even he did not suspect the full tragedy until the doctor came to remove the instrument. Out it came, minus quite half an inch and all its quicksilver, while the Rajpat gulped and blinked over a disagreeable performance well completed.

"Good God!" exclaimed the doctor, horrified indignation in his voice, "the old fool has eaten it."

Luckily he spoke in English, and McDermot interfered before any damage could be done to the old man's feelings as well as to his inside.

"Hardly his fault, doctor. The poor old chap didn't know what else to do with it. He is new to your profession, I gather. Will it make him very sick?"

The doctor was staring at the man and at the thermometer in turns. "I don't suppose so," he answered, "I will let him have an emetic in any case and keep him back till the next train. My new thermometer too! If you can talk his lingo, explain, will you? I am almighty busy."

McDermot explained to the best of his ability, then the train getting under weigh again, he was forced to leave the old man to his fate, and carried away a pathetic picture of the Rajpat, with the same confidence which had caused him to nibble a quicksilver bulb, drinking down the liquid held out to him sternly by the doctor.

"They have to take us and our methods on trust," McDermot thought, "and by Jove, how grandly most of them do it!"

The train pulling itself together for a final effort gave a shrill triumphant whistle and hurled itself into the blackness of the last tunnel, to emerge from that seclusion and come to a full stop in Shillong station. McDermot, leaving the conveyance of his scanty luggage in Rutna's hands, elected to refuse all offers of the station rickshaws and started to walk at a brisk pace to the club. It was nearing teatime, and he was hungry. The air up here, blowing straight from the snows of which Brown had been so envious, struck upon his heat-loving nature as chill. He was glad to walk fast and pull his overcoat round him. But he was forced to admit that its very sharpness was exhilarating.

Shillong from the English point of view, as he could see, was practically deserted ; he found the club a barrack of loneliness and had tea all by himself. He was meditating going off to his room, and seeking an early bed, being tired now he came to think of it with his day and night journey, when he perceived Dr. Crow saunter negligently into the clubroom. The little man paused in the entrance, and in his slow survey of the room took in McDermot's presence with a start of surprise.

"Hullo, McDermot!" he exclaimed, coming quickly across the room, "you here? What on earth brings you up at this time of year?" He spread out his hands dramatically and dropped into a chair at McDermot's table.

"I am only up for a weekend," McDermot explained briefly; "wanted a change, and lack of society won't bother me."

"Well, I suppose not," Dr. Crow fixed in his eyeglass and stared across at him. "Been ill?" he asked.

"No," McDermot shook his head; "do I look it, from a professional point of view?"

The other man laughed, he leant back in his chair, a favourite position, his hands clasping his knees. "Can't say you do," he admitted. "I was just wondering—" he broke off and changed the subject. "We have just been through a gloomy period," he said, and rang the little handbell which stood on the table between them. "What will you have, McDermot, bitters or a liqueur?"

"Bitters, please," McDermott answered. "You refer, I suppose," he went on after the drinks had been brought, "to the Hamilton affair—it must have been very sad."

"Yes," agreed Dr. Crow; he paused a moment. "I have never known myself so submerged in a tragedy. You know how quickly we doctors push the fact of death aside, when we can, but this one somehow—I helped Hamilton to bury her," he said suddenly, "and bring the young man up here."

"Did you?" asked McDermott. He spoke reflectively, his eyes on the wineglass in his hand. "Cholera?" he added.

"Yes," Dr. Crow leant forward to put his empty glass on the table, "cholera. Worst case I have seen for years, she was dead in four hours. How are things in Bholpur?" he asked with rather an abrupt change of conversation.

"Not as well as I should like," McDermott admitted, "if I get the chance there are one or two things I should like to consult Hamilton about. Is young Hamilton very ill?" He looked across at the doctor interrogatively.

"Turned the corner a fortnight ago," Crow hesitated.

"The Hamiltons I am sure would be glad to see you, and would probably be mortally offended if you went away without making an attempt. Of course they do not come to the club much."

"You think I might call, then?" McDermot asked.
"I have only got till to-morrow evening."

"Why, of course," Crow stood up; "or better still, I am dining there this evening, I will tell them you are up and they will drop you a line to-morrow morning."

"Thank you," agreed McDermot; he stood up likewise and together they strolled to the door. "Explain to them though that I do not want to intrude, just if Hamilton could spare me an official quarter of an hour."

"That will be all right," Crow assured him. "It will do Mrs. Hamilton good to see some one fresh," he added as he swung himself into the saddle of the pony that was waiting for him outside the club door.

McDermot watched him disappear round the corner, then turned back into the club to find his room.

"It is a mad chase I have come after," he thought, "and yet—well, Crow isn't easy in his mind about that cholera."

Mrs. Hamilton's little note of invitation was waiting for him on the breakfast-table when he came down next morning. "Would he come over to lunch that day, they would be more than glad to see him?"

He went, and Marjorie received him alone in the drawing-room. Jack had not yet returned from office, but he would not be long. Marjorie herself appeared a little nervous, as if not quite at her ease, and waving McDermot to a chair sat down in one near the window.

"What brings you up here?" she asked, repeating

Crow's question of the night before. " You don't often favour this social spot."

The light fell across her lap, McDermot noticed with surprise how restless her hands were; restlessness he would have imagined as being absolutely foreign to her nature.

" Yes," he admitted, sitting down on the chair she had indicated, " I do not often treat myself like this. This year, however, has been a hard one; Bholpur, if it isn't heresy for a Resident to say so, has been getting on my nerves. I wanted a change, and though it has been a very short one it has done me good already."

" You go back to-night then ? " asked Mrs. Hamilton.

" Unfortunately, yes," McDermot looked up at her. " I have no orthodox words of sympathy, Mrs. Hamilton," he said, " but believe me I have felt your brother-in-law's tragedy a lot; it cast a tremendous gloom over our spirits in Bholpur."

Mrs. Hamilton crossed and uncrossed her hands. " It has been very dreadful," she said, " and I—" she stood up quickly and turned her back on him, " sometimes I feel as if I couldn't bear it any more."

McDermot was looking at his hands. " I could see you were worried to the edge of your endurance when I came in," he said, " and I feel as if I had no right to thrust myself upon you at such a time, but the brother-in-law is doing well, isn't he—you are not nervous for him ? "

" No, oh no," she answered, " but I am blaming myself, Mr. McDermot, that is really what it is. I never liked her, you know, I was almost glad that she should die." Her voice came to a hushed pause, she faced

round to him again. "Would you have credited me with such unkindness?" she asked.

McDermot stood up, his eyes met hers a little sternly. "I don't know," he answered, "that it is always unkind to be glad when people die. Swinburne says somewhere —you first initiated me to Swinburne, do you remember—'At the doors of life, at the gates of birth, there are worse things waiting for men than Death.'"

He heard the catch at her breath as she answered. "What do you mean?" she asked.

McDermot came a little nearer to her, outside he could hear the clatter of ponies' hoofs on the drive and Hamilton's voice talking to the servant.

"I have been thinking a lot about Mrs. Gerald Hamilton since we heard this news," he said, "and remembering what you had told me in connection with her and Ishaq Khan, something I overheard at the ball perhaps sharpened my memory. Anyway—" he paused a second and his eyes met Mrs. Hamilton's. "Six months ago," he went on, speaking quickly, for in a moment Hamilton would be in the room, "a woman I know of died in Bholpur, but before death found her she had been through and suffered things it is not good even to think of. She died, a white woman, in the harem of Prince Ishaq Khan."

He finished abruptly and turned to greet his host, but in that one second he had read the truth, vivid and unshakable, in Mrs. Hamilton's blanched face.

The conversation was not resumed, and with Jack Hamilton McDermot talked Bholpur and its needs strenuously all through lunch. The Resident perhaps carried away with him a rather stricken conscience, he

had so palpably taken advantage of Mrs. Hamilton in thus extracting the truth from her. Yet something within him, some memory of Esther as he had grown to know her during their days in Camp together, drove him on. And while the train swung and creaked and rattled through the night-veiled plains towards Bholpur, Mc-Dermot sat up in his bunk smoking innumerable cigars, the busy brain working behind the light blue eyes. Esther should not be left to the fate he had little doubt was awaiting her, not so long as he had brain and heart to serve her, only, as he was forced to admit to himself, his hands were pretty well tied so long as the Hamiltons remained true to their present version of the story.

CHAPTER XXIII

“But your words were flame and your kisses fire,
And who shall resist a strong desire.”

JUST as in some dances one false step throws one out of tune with the melody for the rest of the dance, so it is in life. And the small mistakes count as irrevocably and as terribly as the large ones, therein lies the tragedy. It would be easier, one often thinks, to be punished for some great crime, but that the little errors, the inadvertent wrongs, should be dealt with by the same harsh law strikes upon our human hearts as injustice—the injustice of Fate.

“The moving finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on, nor all your piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all your tears wash out one word of it.”

Esther had taken that one step, and almost before she was aware of it the gates of yesterday shut down behind her. There was to be no turning back ~~that~~ she was to learn through great anguish only to-morrow was left her, a to-morrow out of tune and jarring with all the sweet melodies of the world.

She did not realize that at once, for Ishaq Khan never left her side, and her mind and senses lay numbed and still under the spell of his fascination. It is to be doubted

that she loved him, love does not enter into such lists as these, but for the time being she was his utterly and entirely, bound by some spell, held by some enchantment. She never paused in those first days to think of yesterday or to-morrow, though sometimes her thoughts would stir vaguely with memories of her childhood and she thought of her mother a great deal. But of the force which had driven her so remorselessly to leave the good, and choose the evil in life, she could take but little count. It was Fate, she supposed, and evil had lain dormant in her all through those months and years even while she dreamed she hated and resented it. Why had she been given the power to hate and yet have been left lacking the strength to resist evil ?

Yet all unknown to herself, a counter force was already awake in Esther's heart, ready to do battle for the sake of the lost past, a counter force that she had never dreamed could lay hold on her life. How she followed its guidance, even unto the gates of death, remains to be told.

The Garden Palace of Bholpur, it was there that Ishaq Khan first took Esther, stands out a cool and vivid splash of white against the trees and thick-growing shrubs that hem it round. So much is it cut off from the other Palace buildings and dwellings that it appears to be in a land of its own. No noise from outside reaches into its hushed solitude, even the sky is hardly to be seen through the thick-leaved canopy overhead. It was built many centuries ago by one of Ishaq Khan's forebears for a favourite dancing-girl—her name, Rose of the Garden, is still enshrined in the carven marble and trellis work of the verandah.

The building is square in shape and contains two rooms,

both fronting with wide-open doors on to a tank of languid, scarcely ever ruffled water. Jessamine grows near to, and up the pillars of the verandah, flinging its scented blossoms into the rooms, filling the air with its still perfume.

Sometimes Esther wondered whether she hated or loved the scent of the jessamine flowers, their perfume seemed to clog her thoughts much in the same way as Ishaq Khan's influence, and the scent of them was to pervade her life with an unforgettable hateful memory. She had the place very much to herself, her only attendant being a stout old ayah woman, Bagoo, who waited on her single-handed, for though Esther was conscious of other servants, hearing their voices outside, she never saw them. Not until Ishaq Khan's first real absence when, about a month after her arrival, he was called to Calcutta and stayed away four days, did she realize to the full extent her loneliness, or how absolutely she had cut herself adrift from the rest of the world. She had no occupations, no books even to read, and thought could afford her no pleasant solace.

On the afternoon of Ishaq Khan's expected return Esther lay waiting for him in the front room of the Garden Palace. The room behind her, for she lay on a couch of heaped-up cushions in the centre of one of the wide openings, was gradually growing dark. Long shadows were creeping into the corners and up the walls. The little light there was played on the silver brushes on the dressing-table and reflected itself in the long mirror let into the wall. Esther was alone save for the fat native woman, who crouched at the head of the couch slowly waving a fan backwards and forwards. That

morning Esther had fainted while doing her hair, she still felt a little dizzy and shaken. She was also a little surprised because such a thing had never happened to her before, and she was wondering vaguely what would become of her should she be taken ill. The thought brought with it a quick touch of fear, she sat up abruptly, putting up her hands to her face, pushing the hair from her eyes.

Bagoo, so quiet had her mistress lain this past hour, looked up with a visible start. "What does the Light of the Stars desire?" she asked in quaintly phrased English.

Bagoo had been Minnie Brown's ayah, and from her had picked up a queer smattering of the white folks' tongue, which made her valuable, despite her dirt and fatness, to her present mistress.

"I don't know," Esther answered. She got up quickly to her feet, swaying a little. "I don't feel well, Bagoo. I am afraid to be ill—I am afraid—" she spoke hysterically.

Bagoo watched her with stolid patience—nerves and such kind of outbreaks she had grown accustomed to from Minnie Brown.

"It grows dark. Without doubt that is what the Presence means. I will fetch lights."

She hobble~~d~~ slowly and ponderously into the other room; Esther could hear much shrill abuse being exchanged between her and the menservants. It was growing dark as Bagoo had said, she could see her figure faint and indefinite like some ghost reflected in the mirror.

The woman returned presently, a grotesque figure, a

lamp in either hand. "There," she remarked with a fat sigh of satisfaction, placing them one on each side of the looking-glass, "now can the Light of the Stars see to dress herself. Abdul has word of our lord's arrival in the Palace. As for illness—the Presence need have no fear of that, 'tis common among women to feel thus when 'tis the first babe."

For a second, it seemed to Esther as if time stood still to hear the sound her heart was making, she struggled with the meaning of the woman's words. Then with dry lips that almost refused to speak she repeated them.

"The first babe?" she whispered, her voice rose to a scream. "What are you saying, Bagoo?—not that, oh God! say I haven't done that."

Bagoo watched her with a certain amount of concern. "Did the memsahib not guess or know?" she asked. Her face assumed an expression of intense interest. "I guessed from the first day—this morning when the Presence fell, I was by her side and caught her. Now that the Presence knows, there is no need to fear, her time is not yet awhile."

Esther hardly heard, the truth of the woman's belief she never doubted, the awful horror of the wrong she had done to Gerald surged up and up against her brain, till she thought she must go mad with it. Almost against her will she moved across to the mirror, and stared staring at her reflected self. Her English clothes had been taken from her on the first day, she was dressed now in long spangled drawers gathered in at the ankles with heavy gold anklets, her over-vest was of the same material. Every line and curve of her body was visible under the thin stuff, gold bracelets and necklaces lay on her arms

and neck. Her hair was heavily scented, her eyes carefully blackened, her mouth coloured to a vivid scarlet. Evilly beautiful, that was it, and hateful, altogether hateful, truth stared at her from the mirror at least. With a cry of fear she covered her eyes from the picture and shrank back.

Bagoo took it upon herself to interfere, her ears had caught the sound of approaching footsteps.

"The Lord of the Harem is at hand," she said, and Esther dropping her hands turned her back on the mirror and faced round. She knew fear at that moment, wild primæval mother fear, not for herself, but for the life within herself, which must at all costs be saved from this man.

Ishaq Khan stood in the door watching her with a curious smile. He was immaculately attired in English riding kit, his black hair brushed very sleek to his head. In his hand he carried a small riding-whip, with which he flicked the tops of his boots.

"Well," he said, "has time hung heavy, Esther?—glad I am back?" He came across to her, flinging his riding whip on the couch in passing, and taking her two hands pulled her half carelessly into the circle of his arms.

Instinctively she would have drawn back but all her mind was sharpened by fear; she must not let him see, lest he should guess her secret.

"The days have been long," she heard herself saying, "it is dull and terribly lonely when you are away. I feel like some bird that is caged."

Ishaq Khan laughed. "You are hysterical, Esther." He dropped her hands and walking to the window flung

himself on the couch. "It is by my wish and orders that you are not allowed out beyond these walls. You ~~forget~~ that you and I have sinned against the canons of the Government; I am not afraid of public opinion and it is too late for you to fear it, but at the same time there are limits, and my Resident is an extraordinary man."

"Mr. McDermot, do you mean?" asked Esther, "does he live near here?"

"Far enough, and yet near enough to be in the way," Ishaq Khan answered. "But in any case you couldn't go about like an ordinary person—now you are one of my Harem, you must see that."

"Yes," said Esther. "Tell me," she went on, lifting her eyes to his for a moment, "what has happened—outside, I mean."

"You mean monsieur, the young and amiable husband?" he stared across at her and the look on his face puzzled Esther. "You are dead to them all," he said.

She did not grasp his meaning. "I suppose I am," she answered dully; under the rouge her white face flushed. "To all intents and purposes I am dead—here," she ended.

"To more than all intents and purposes you are dead," Ishaq Khan's voice held a sneer in it. "I don't know what Hamilton and Crow played for—to save a scandal I suppose—anyway, poor young Mrs. ~~Hamilton~~ died of cholera the night of the ball." He paused a moment. "They have put up a pathetic cross to your memory," he added. "By the way, come over here, that I may feel and touch you who are dead to every one in the world but me."

His careless insolent tone roused some rebellious nerve

in Esther, but again fear bade her hide her feelings, and she crossed the room to him.

"So," said Ishaq Khan, he pulled her to her knees in front of him, "now you are mine entirely, what shall I do with you, beautiful one?—have you any idea?" She could scarcely see his face, for his back was to the lamps, but the touch of his hands on her filled her with such shuddering revulsion that her control gave way and she rose, pushing his hands from her.

"Don't touch me," she said, "I can't bear it—something has happened that alters everything. I can't stay with you, you must let me go away. What does it matter what people think or say, I needn't go back—they say I am dead, well, I can stay dead, but not with you, not near you to be touched by your hands, looked at by your eyes. You must let me go, you must, you must."

Her voice broke in hysterical sobbing—she crouched where she stood, leaning against the pillars, her hands outstretched as if to keep him from her.

Ishaq Khan watched her, his face had lost all semblance of culture, passion flamed in his eyes and twisted his mouth. When her sobbing had quietened somewhat he leant a little towards her. "So," he said, "what is all this, why this sudden dislike of me and my hands?" His eyes caught and held Esther's; as if fascinated by their stare she drew a little nearer him and he stood up, throwing his arms round her, drawing her to him. "Kiss me," he whispered, ready triumph sounded in his voice. "Kiss me, and let's hear no more of this nonsense, Esther."

The old clinging sweetness and spell seemed closing round her, but the new instinct was strong, stronger even

than she realized—she struggled in his arms and broke free.

"No," she repeated, her breath coming quickly, her eyes wide with fear, "no, no. I want to get away, don't you understand. I can't bear you to touch me or make love to me, I want to get away, right away. Your hands are black—black!"

She was more than a little hysterical; Ishaq Khan's eyes narrowed as he watched her.

"Very well," he said finally, "I shall not touch you again, since that is what you wish. But I have not quite finished with you; you cannot push me aside as a toy that you are tired of. I have taken from you all that you had to give, haven't I, body and soul, and honour, there is only your beauty left for me to torture and destroy, and I will do it, make no mistake there." He rose and came across the room to her and the strength went from her, she fell to her knees at his feet, putting up hands that clung to him in terror.

"Prince, Prince," she begged, "what are you saying? have you gone mad or is this a game to frighten me? I—I—"

"A game!" he laughed roughly, and flung her hands from him so that she lay crouched on the floor. "You shall see how much of a game it is when I shall wreak my passion on you. I want to see the red lines of blood on your skin, I want to feel it run and hear you cry for mercy, you who hate me because you are white."

He turned from her, and walking to the door at the back of the room held aside the curtain. "Abdul!" he called, "Abdul!"

Esther did not see the negro come into the room, but

she heard his step and felt him stoop to lift her ; at his touch her terror found voice and she screamed loudly. "Don't let him touch me," she cried, "anything but that—don't let him touch me."

Her frenzy made her strong, she broke from Abdul and ran wildly to the farthest corner of the room.

The negro regarded the scene, a wide grin on his dusky countenance. "She is strong," he remarked gravely to Ishaq Khan, "I will get help."

He strode to the door and returned presently with two dark-skinned coolies, and between them they stripped and beat Esther, beat her till the wet rope cut lines of red on the fair skin, and the warm blood dropped and trickled slowly from each line. She made no sound, it may be pride helped her there, and she lay face downwards on the floor till it almost seemed as if they wreaked their vengeance on a dead thing. Abdul anyway was of that opinion. With an abrupt word to his assistants he dismissed them, and stooping shifted Esther's body face uppermost, wiping his hands scrupulously clean from the blood that smeared them.

"She has had all she can bear, Lord," he announced, glancing up at the Prince, "it is of little use to inflict pain on a dead thing."

Ishaq Khan came slowly across and looked down on the woman. "She did not cry out," he asserted sullenly.

The negro shrugged his shoulders. "Without doubt the pain silenced her," he said.

Ishaq Khan turned on his heel. "Take her to the women's quarters," he ordered, "fetch Bagoo to her ; if it is possible see that she does not die."

Abdul after his departure summoned his assistants

again, and with surprisingly gentle hands they staunched and wiped clean the wheals on Esther's back and side, then the two coolies carrying the still insensible figure, covered now with a white cloth, with Abdul to lead the way, passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XXIV

No hope, no change ! The clouds have shut us in,
And through the cloud the sullen sun strikes down
Full on the bosom of the tortured town.

R. Kipling.

ALMOST McDermot's first action on his return to Bholpur was to send for Rutna.

"Rutna," he said, "the day before we left here for Shillong, when driving on my way back from the Palace, I passed the chota Hamiltons' bearer in the road. If the man is still here I would have speech with him."

Rutna salaamed gravely, allowing no surprise at the request to appear on his face, and continued tidying away his sahib's clothes.

"I have heard tell in the servants' quarters that he is leaving to-day," he ventured presently. "I myself have had no speech with him."

"Well, hurry up, leave those things then," commanded his master, "and go and find the man at once."

Rutna found Shahjahan after a somewhat lengthy visit to the Bazaar. He was aided in his search by Shahjahan's stout brother-in-law, who informed Rutna in passing that Shahjahan appeared to have found some subject very much in common with Narrayan, the sightless water-carrier, for the two of them could nearly always be found together. Rutna had his own shrewd suspicion as

to what the subject might be, but contented himself by getting rid of Hira Lal as quickly as possible and finding his way to Narrayan's hut. There was Shahjahan true enough, squatting on the raised platform under the shade of the enormous peepul and indulging in what was of necessity somewhat a one-sided argument with his strange companion. Rutna had only once seen Narrayan at close quarters, and he had no wish to repeat the experiment, therefore he stood where he was on the path and hailed Shahjahan.

"Thou art to come with me to the Residency, O Shahjahan, the Lat Sahib (Governor) would have speech with thee."

Shahjahan rose in somewhat of a disbelieving mood. "Of a truth, brother? How knows he that I am here even?"

"My Sahib," said Rutna, visible pride in the utterance, and not lowering his voice in the slightest, "has the ears and the eyes of a devil. He sees and knows all; make haste, brother, keep him not waiting."

Narrayan stood up on the sudden, his groping hands caught at Shahjahan's coat, his voiceless question was quite understandable. Shahjahan prevaricated easily.

"Yes, yes," he assured him, "I will speak of you to the Resident Sahib, have no fear, his ear shall know of your complaint." Then he pulled himself away and joined Rutna on the road.

McDermot had moved into his office by the time the two men arrived, and in a manner—though he found it difficult to focus his mind on anything—started the work of the day. He was doing rather an unusual thing he knew in thus sending for another man's servant and

questioning him on such a matter, but he had dealt long enough with natives to know that their ideas of correct procedure varied from the English one, and at present he was handling a case that had very little of the English element in it. Therefore he received Shahjahan surrounded by his panoply of office, there was no secrecy about the matter, and waving the man to a position in front of his desk ordered Rutna to clear the room of chuprassis that they might be alone.

Shahjahan was uncomfortable and ill at ease—that was the effect McDermot had hoped this official atmosphere might produce. He looked up as soon as they were alone, meeting the rather nervous eyes with his keen blue ones.

"You know," he said, McDermot spoke Urdu like a native, "what I wish to speak to you of?"

"Huzoor," Shahjahan prevaricated, for somehow, facing this man's eyes, he did know, "how should one, who is but as the dust of your honour's feet, know what is in your honour's mind?"

"You know," McDermot repeated; his eyes never wavered.

Shahjahan salaamed hurriedly. "Of a truth," he began again, but McDermot held up his hand.

"That is enough," he said. "If you will not tell me of your own free will I must speak more plainly. You came to Bholpur because there was something—" he paused a second, and again his eyes held Shahjahan's, "something that had to do with the last night of the Bholpur camp about which you were curious. And you came to Bholpur because you thought you could find this knowledge in the Palace, is that not so?"

The question was abrupt, Shahjahan jumped.

"The wisdom of the huzoor is as that of the All Seeing," he acknowledged meekly.

"Well," said McDermot ; he picked up a little paper-knife that lay on the table and bent it in his fingers, "what have you found out, Shahjahan, that is what I desire to know?"

"Huzoor," Shahjahan took a step nearer the table, his eyes searched the room for a possible eavesdropper, and though there was no one visible he dropped his voice to a whisper.

"There is nothing to find out, huzoor," he said, "for the memsahib is dead."

The paper-knife snapped in those strong fingers, McDermot picked up the pieces and fitted them together mechanically as he answered.

"How do you know this?" he asked.

"I will tell," Shahjahan replied ; he drew himself still nearer the table and spoke quickly in carefully lowered tones. "Know then, huzoor, that I have done this not for curiosity as you would suppose, but for love of my sahib, who is unto me father, mother and son, I having none of these of my own blood. Your wisdom has discovered that while my sahib lay at death's door the other sahibs arranged this matter of the white mem's death to save disgrace ; without doubt it was well done, but I love my sahib, and I know, none better, how dear he held this white woman, so I waited, and when I found that because of her death—for huzoor, my sahib thinks her to be dead—the days held no more joy for him, I made up my mind to find her, and if possible to take her back to him. So I came to Bholpur, and three nights ago one who hates the Prince for great good reason led

me by secret paths to the Garden Palace, and I hid in the bushes by the side of the tank. There were lights and noise in the Palace, servants hurrying to and fro, and for a long time I waited. Then presently the Prince came forth, walking carelessly like one distraught, his face as he passed me looking like those whom God has touched with madness. Then one by one the lights died down, the noises in the Palace ceased, and I was about to creep forward when I saw four men come out and between them they carried some limp body covered with the death sheet, while one man walked in front carrying a lantern. And as they came opposite my hiding-place, they paused, the weight being heavy on the off-bearer's hands, to shift their burden. And one man, it was the one who had felt the burden heavy, said to his fellows : ‘ Where do they bury such as she, have we far to go ? ’ I heard not the answer, huzoor, for at that moment the man with the lantern turned and the light fell across the thing they carried, touching on its face, which had fallen a little sideways from the death sheet and so hung uncovered. Then I knew that I looked upon the face of the white woman and that she was dead.”

He paused, McDermot had not looked at him through the recital, nor did he lift his eyes now.

“ That being so,” Shahjahan drew himself up a little, “ it entered my head there was no more to be done. What need to embitter the mind of my sahib against his own folk. The mem is of a certainty dead, in time the pain of his heart will ease a little and he will forget.”

McDermot’s lips moved. “ If I had only acted in the first place ! ” he was whispering to himself ; the thought was bitter in his heart. Then he stood up, and dropping

the broken paper-knife into the basket, faced Shahjahan. The man had spoken truth to him, he knew that, brown eyes met blue squarely.

" You have done well, Shahjahan," he said. " This matter shall go no further. And you are a good servant to your sahib ; if you should ever need help or service come to me, I shall be glad to give it."

But after the man had gone, the Resident went back to his office table and for a second before he could again put forth his hand and deal with the work that lay round him waiting to be done, he covered his eyes, shutting out a world that had grown of a sudden hateful to him.

So Shahjahan went back to his sahib a fortnight before his leave was up, but as he explained to Gerald whilst pulling off his polo boots : " The affairs of my brother's house were set in order quicker than I thought possible, and was it likely that I should leave this budly (substitute) to torment thee longer than was needful ? As it is he has completely ruined one of the sahib's almost new suits of clothes by careless packing."

" Rot ! " Gerald remonstrated, " he was quite a good boy. All the same I am glad you are back, Shahjahan, no one else keeps my polo sticks really fit to use."

And Shahjahan, though careful not to voice his idea, was grateful to think that polo should once more be interesting to the heart of his sahib.

McDermot had a letter from the Hamiltons about a month after his interview with Shahjahan. Mrs. Hamilton had not been very well and was being shipped home, Mr. Hamilton hoped to follow himself in the course of a month for three months' leave ; they had good news from Gerald, he seemed to be getting quite cheerful again.

McDermot put the letter aside unanswered, he could not as yet forgive the Hamiltons.

It is to be believed that Marjorie realized this.

"He knows," she said in speaking of McDermot to her husband. "I knew he guessed that time in Shillong. And he liked Esther; I can understand that he can forgive us just as little as I can forgive myself. Oh, Jack, won't you see how wrong it is, and tell Gerald the truth?"

"To save you from worrying over it, I believe I would," Jack admitted, "but can't you see, dearest, how it really has been for the best. As for Gerald, why, dear one, what was his last letter full of—polo, mixed in with Miss Thomas. Gerald is forgetting, as I knew he would. Believe me, Marjorie, I knew the brother when I decided on that scheme of not telling him. He was always, as a baby, easily pleased, easily reduced to tears. My earliest recollection of him is when he was four and I was twelve, on our first voyage home to England. Gerald displayed an enormous capacity for eating ginger biscuits, even in the midst of the most horrible pangs of sea-sickness. He would eat until he was ill, wait a few minutes, and eat again. It's not romantic, but it's a striking example of Gerald's philosophy."

"I wish I thought the same as you do," sighed Marjorie. "And, anyway, apart from Gerald, there is the girl to be thought of. I simply can't get Esther out of my mind, Jack; one hears such terrible things about harems."

"Most of them nonsense, dear one," Jack answered. "Believe me, the girl is happy—more so than she deserves to be."

His face hardened, and Marjorie gave up the discussion.

She was beginning to realize that there was a good deal of tough Scotch granite in her husband's character.

Marjorie's boat was about the last one to leave Bombay, carrying its precious freight of women and children, before the hot weather set in. There is always a great exodus of families towards the end of April—all who can migrate, either across the seas or up to the hills, leaving the less fortunate to face as well as they can the prospect of three months in which no cloud will soften the hard blueness of the skies, or dim even for a second the sun's fierce fire. In such places as Calcutta or Bombay the hot weather is, in these days of electric fans, a thing to smile at, but in those little outlying posts, dotted all over the wide plains of India, where civilization has as yet brought none of her luxuries, it is a thing to be feared and shunned. There, cholera, plague and famine stalk hand in hand with a heat so overpowering that it saps the strength from mind and body and kills sometimes the soul in man. And it is in just such places that the men of England give yearly their dole of work and often life, and it is because of those lonely scattered graves—that army of sad-eyed ghosts, who died with no glory nor even hope of glory in the laying down of their lives—that our hold on India is as strong, as unshakable, as it is.

Bholpur, as Brown had once in a fit of temper declared, was as near to being like Hell in the hot weather as any place could be. The sun blazed akroad from 4 a.m onwards, and even the nights, with no suspicion of a breeze, hung close and heavy, causing the atmosphere to closely resemble an oven at a great deal more than baking point. Brown himself slept, or rather grunted and grumbled, upon a tight stretched skin bed

placed on the verandah under a punkah. Several times in the course of the night Brown would roll out of bed and have his couch sluiced down with water, swearing—though this McDermot refused to believe—that the water hissed and steamed as it ran.

In the day-time, the Residency was shuttered at every available window and door to keep out, as much as possible, the fierce sunshine, and Brown's costume was of the scantiest variety, and certainly would not have passed muster in Bond Street. He wore, during these hot weather days, a vest of silk merino, a pair of cotton ("more like muslin," Donaldson had been heard to remark) pants, and patent-leather slippers, looking grotesque as a finishing to long, hairy, bare legs. Patent leather pumps were Brown's peculiar fad; any one else would have considered them conducive to heat.

At 6.30 p.m., for thus are Englishmen constituted, the society of Bholphur donned flannels and sallied forth to play tennis. Tennis—make a note of it, with the temperature at 115 in the shade. There was only one tennis court in Bholpur, standing in the club grounds, and composed of asphalt. Brown had tried grass—it absolutely dried up and vanished during May. He had tried mud—that washed itself to nothing during the monsoon; asphalt alone seemed able to withstand all the rigours of the climate, so asphalt it remained.

Here, every evening of their lives, Brown, McDermot, Donaldson and Lyall played tennis. Sometimes the Black Beetle joined them, but he was not keen on the game and they were four without him. When it became too dark for tennis they would stroll into the club and, changing into fresh flannels, play billiards until dinner

time. Here Miss Lyall joined them, to sit and watch their efforts, or peruse the weekly English papers. There was not much conversation, because naturally there was very little to discuss, but these evening hours were the social side of their lives, and the fact of one member being absent was wont to cast a surprising gloom over the party.

There is something ridiculous in this picture. To see the strength and sadness of it one must needs be an initiated Anglo-Indian. To have lived it is to know, and no outsider will ever be able to understand.

Donaldson, being new to the life, and very young, started the hot weather by taking things too strenuously, with the result that by the middle of June it was deemed expedient to dismiss him to the hills. Boils attacked him, fever tickled him up, a touch of dysentery nearly finished him off. He was, for a youth keen on society, strangely unwilling to take his leave; the real reason of this he confided to Brown, in a burst of explanatory arguments, the day before his journey was decided on.

"It's old Ra Chandra's brother," he said. "That time he was in my charge, after Ra Chandra's attempt on Hamilton, I got sort of fond of him, and I want to keep an eye on him—he's only a kid, you know. Ra Chandra, they say, is practically dying—he takes it hard, the boy. I wanted to keep in touch with him, have him up here for confabs and things—keep him away from that rotten bazaar lot."

"The lad may be all you say, but he isn't going to be allowed to ruin your health or my reputation as a Doctor," retorted Brown. "To the hills you go, young man, the moment you can be moved. For the matter

of that, I'll place a fatherly eye on this particular limb of Satan myself, if that will console you."

It did not particularly. Donaldson hardly trusted that Brown's blunt kindness, even if he remembered to apply it, would be of much use, but he could see the hopelessness of further argument.

Ten days later he was packed into the Shillong Mail by Brown and borne off hillwards, while the remainder of Bholpur society, slightly depressed by the loss of their youngest and noisiest member, went stolidly on with their round of work, baths, tennis, billiards—more baths and bed.

CHAPTER XXV

“ But lo ! the path is missed, I must go back,
And thirst to drink when next I reach the spring
Which once I stained, which since may have grown black.”

JUNE finished, giving place to July, and still the hot weather flamed abroad in Bholpur. Its iron hand lay on Palace and hovel alike ; even the jungle showed parched under its glare. Nowhere was the heat more intense, the blaze of the sun more fierce, than in the marble square of the Harem of the Palace. The high walls shut out whatever faint chance of a breeze there might have been, the marble stones caught and reflected the sun with dazzling splendour. The water in the centre tank had dried up and vanished, the palms in pots standing at the four corners were withered and dead ; there seemed no shade, no rest for the eyes wherever one looked.

Evidently the inmates were conscious of this, for the trellised verandahs were deserted and the doors along them were shut against the devastating heat. Complete silence reigned all day, except when the fretful whimper of a child broke on the air, or some woman’s voice was raised in shrill argument. How did they pass their days, the countless women, who were all round her, Esther sometimes wondered. In sleep, she must suppose,

since work was palpably out of the question, in the dim shuttered gloom of their rooms. For herself, she scarcely ever slept, and the days and nights passed so monotonously the same that sometimes she was driven to think she no longer really lived, but that this body of hers was some wistful ghost struggling through interminable shadows. How long she had been in this little shuttered room she could not tell. The days counted as long years, and she had grown to dread the outside world, the hard bright sun, the noise of human voices, when twilight let out the other women of the harem to sit in little chattering groups on the verandah steps.

Esther had come back to life within the four walls of the room in which she now lived, after the night of agony which ended her life in the Garden Palace. Of what had happened to her after Abdul stooped to touch her she had no recollection. Merciful unconsciousness had fallen round her with the first blow, but the scars remained where the lash had fallen, and the agony of shame cut deeper into her heart than blows could have done. When she had wakened, as from some troubled dream, it was to find herself lying in a small dimly-lit room. The bed, hard and uncomfortable, on which she lay, stretched the length of the wall on one side; the one tiny window set high above her head was thickly barred by trellised brick work, so that the light which filtered through was dim and uncertain even when blazing mid-day held the world outside. There was nothing else in the room except a small gilt mirror on the opposite wall, and a green chinc, which hung immovable in the doorway.

Bagoo had been there to wait on her. Under the rough

but not unskilful fingers, the long lines of pain on Esther's body had healed up into faint white scars. And Bagoo had been sympathetic and voluble in broken English. From her Esther had learnt that Ishaq Khan had left Bholpur, had sailed, so rumour had it in the Palace, across the Black water to Bilati—the land of the white folk. Muzfat reigned in the Palace, Abdul in the Harem. They had their orders, so Bagoo knew, to keep the white mem a prisoner, and without doubt Abdul would see that was done ; but, otherwise, she was free of the trellised verandahs, the marble square, the company of the other women. They would not ill-treat her. She had nothing to fear there, because of the child life that lay in her keeping. She was, as it were, sacred to the Harem women's eyes, so great a sanctity does motherhood carry with it in the East.

But Esther shrank from mixing with them. She did not define it to herself, but within her heart had waked such a horror of their colour and their ways that she preferred even the solitude and shadowed gloom of her room. Only at midday, when the rest of the Harem lay with doors tightly barred against the sun, would she fling open her door and, lying on the floor, stretch out her arms till her fingers just touched the sun-bathed doorstep. These midday hours, and Bagoo's daily visits, were her only communication with the outside world. It is little wonder that sometimes she seemed mad, and always, waking or sleeping, strange forms and imaginations occupied her thoughts.

On this particular day in mid-July, while silence and solitude held the outside world, Esther lay, not in her usual position by the door, but crouched up near the

bed, one arm out-flung across it. Opposite her squatted Bagoo, and between the women, spread on the floor and half tumbling off the bed, were piled up heaps of finery, soft silk sarees, spangled veils, gold ornaments and jewelled threads. Esther's face lay hidden in her out-stretched arm. Her whole form expressed shrinking fear ; such dread was in her heart at the news. Bagoo had brought her, that it kept her dazed and quiet. Bagoo, on the other hand, was agog with some excitement.

"Look, Light of the Stars," she babbled. "I have brought for you all the finery I could lay hands on. To-morrow you must appear beautiful, more beautiful than ever before. Surely it is a favourable sign that our lord has sent to ask of your well being. To-morrow he returns, and surely by your beauty you shall win back to favour ; and his displeasure, which since a child has been a sudden passion that moves swiftly from him, shall be over, and you and I shall return to the Garden Palace. Look up, my heart, see this fine gold for your hair." She paused in her harangue and eyed Esther anxiously. If what Abdul had given her to understand was true and the lord of the Harem was returning to his old allegiance, her services must be remembered favourably.

"And what need to fear," she went on, bending her fat face a little nearer ; "hast thou not that to give him shortly that will cause his heart to leap with delight. He knows not yet of the babe ; pray Heaven it be a son," she ended soothingly, and put out a hand to smooth the arm nearest her.

Her words carried little meaning to Esther. She was only conscious of one thought—Ishaq Khan was coming

back. What could it mean, save more torture, more shame, more terrible days of pain.

Bagoo, finding all her efforts at soothing conversation repulsed, was laying out in seemly order the things she had brought. They had been in past days part of Minnie Brown's finery, and in the course of her tidying, Bagoo came across a heavy gold waist cord that had been specially designed for Minnie Brown in the days of her power. It finished off at the end with one splendid uncut emerald and from this hung a thin inwrought chain of gold, to which was attached a very commonplace looking vanity box. The little thing, so tawdry and unvaluable, jarred with its setting ; it had been so typical of Minnie Brown. Bagoo touched it, however, with admiring hands.

"There is scent in this," she assured Esther, tugging at her arm to command attention, "which will succeed if aught else fails. One drop mounts to a man's head, making him love past all knowledge, while the spell lasts. I know the secret of its opening, for the other white mem showed it me."

The other white mem ; that touched on Esther's hearing as nothing else had done ; she raised her head and put out her hand for what Bagoo held.

"The other white mem ?" she asked. "What do you mean, Bagoo ?"

Now Bagoo had not meant to speak of Minnie Brown. It is unlucky to speak of the dead, for one thing, and for another, it had been well impressed on the servants of the Palace that this particular white woman and her death were to be forgotten ; therefore, she prevaricated quickly in answer to Esther's question.

" 'Tis long since she lived here. Even I—and I am full old—can scarce remember her."

" But she lived here ? " Esther asked mechanically, her fingers closed on the little trinket box. " She died—here ? " her eyes went round the room, and she shivered.

" Of a truth I know nothing about her," Bagoo answered, " save that I saw her once when I was a child and remember hearing tell of the scent she carried in the bottle. Look ! " she leant forward, eager to divert the conversation. " I will show you how the spring works."

Her fingers, even as they fumbled, chanced on the spring and the box opened in Esther's hands. The scent it had once contained had long since evaporated ; a tiny screwed up piece of paper occupied the vacant space. Esther took it out, unfolding it with stiff fingers. It was very faintly written on. She had to move over to the door before she could decipher it. Then the English words danced for a second before her eyes, so that she could scarcely make them out :—

" To you who come after me, should you be English, as I am, I write these words and hide them here so that he shall not find them. I am dying, and it is too late now to go back, but you perhaps will be able to escape along the lines I planned. Ask for Narrayan—Bagoo can bring him to you. Life is Hell here, do I need to tell you that, I wonder, and in the end he will kill you as he is killing me."

The writing ended abruptly as if the writer had been interrupted.

Bagoo, who had been watching Esther furtively, even while she appeared to be busy tidying away the things

she had brought, waddled across to her now that the reading was finished.

"There is naught but lies or mad talk on the paper; best throw it away, the memory of the woman pleases not our lord."

"Why did you lie to me about her?" asked Esther.

Bagoo grunted uneasily and moved from one foot to the other.

"Truth is not always good, Light of the Stars," she answered; "we have orders here never to speak of the woman; her name slipped unknowingly from my tongue."

"And she was killed," asked Esther, "in this room?" She had always had an unexplainable feeling of horror for this room.

"The Gods forbid," Bagoo retorted quickly; "she died, after many days illness and was glad of death." She nodded her head sagely and lifted a fat hand to pat Esther's arm. "Think no more of her, Light of the Stars, the Gods shall deal otherwise to you. Is not the favour of the lord to return to you? Abdul has certain news."

"No, no"—Esther turned away from the door and the glare of the sun, where it glinted in under the chic. Her voice broke into a torrent of sobs; she put out her hands, pushing Bagoo aside, and stumbled over to the bed, flinging herself down beside it again. "I can't bear any more. God, let me die, let me die."

The native woman followed. She was a little moved to pity by Esther's passionate distress, though she could in no way understand it.

"Nay, hush, hush," she soothed, bending over the

shaking form with clumsy sympathy. "What is it, Light of the Stars? there is no cause for such sorrow. You will be careful now not to anger our lord, and there is no fear of a second beating."

Esther turned to her, clutching at her hands desperately. "You are sorry for me, Bagoo. You have been kind to me, help me to get away, help me to hide, help me, help me."

Bagoo moved uneasily. "Light of the Stars, how is it possible?" she said. "I am but a slave in the household of the Master, his vengeance would fall on me."

She seemed yielding, she was undoubtedly pitiful. Esther seized on the hope the white woman's letter had given her.

"There is Narrayan," she said; "this other woman speaks of Narrayan, he will help me."

The name produced a peculiar effect on Bagoo. She drew her hands away instantly and her eyes showed fear.

"Narrayan," she whispered, "where heard you that name?"

"It is written on the paper," Esther explained eagerly. She caught again at Bagoo's saree. "At least, you will fetch him to me, there is naught to fear in doing that."

But pity had left Bagoo's heart, driven out by a stern sense of self-preservation. She had seen Narrayan only once since the justice of the Prince had been doled out to him; the memory was sufficient.

"We talk foolishness," she answered sharply, and shook herself free from the clinging hands. "I am no party to such deeds, and let not our lord hear that name on your lips, or it will go ill with both of us."

She stooped to gather up an armful of disregarded finery. "I will come again later, when this fancy shall have left you," she said, and turned towards the door.

• So intent had they been in their talk that neither of them had noticed a slight displacement of the chink which hung before the door. Round the edge of it, stealthily, to begin with, then more boldly, since it was unnoticed, slid a small delicately shaped hand. Slowly the chink widened, till finally a girl's figure, thinly draped with a gold saree, slipped into the room and stood there, waiting with eyes that glinted mischievously at Bagoo's fat back till the old woman should turn round and witness the intrusion.

CHAPTER XXVI

“ Sometimes the other maidens sat in tears,
Sometimes, consoled, they jested at their fears,
Musing what lover’s time to them would bring,
But I was silent, thinking of the King.”

BLOOM of the Rose was a new inmate of the Bholpur Harem. It was barely two months since she had been sent thither as a substitute for a long outstanding debt that her father owed to the Bholpur exchequers, and as yet the free air of the Cashmere mountains tinted her cheeks and caused the blood to pulse swift and warm from her heart. An attractive small person too, with the soft roundness of youth in her limbs and the transparent gold brown colouring of the Cashmere women. Just a faint tinge under the gold of her cheeks showed how red ran the blood in her veins, and her eyes were wonderful, black as night when the long lashes veiled them, almost amber-hued when she faced the light. Her mouth was vivid in colouring, her hands dimpled and soft as a baby’s, henna tipped and perfumed. She would prove an imperious queen, Bloom of the Rose. Never in her short life had she known a desire unsatisfied, and before she had been sent here she had been free, free as the wind that blew across the skies, or the wild flowers that danced in the grasses round her mountain home.

To the sheltered women of the harem she was a constant source of bewilderment and admiration, and she in return could in no sort of way understand their passive acceptance of whatever order of things was dealt out to them. Bloom of the Rose, for instance, could not understand why Esther's presence was tolerated in the harem. She disliked her instinctively, to begin with, for her colour and aloofness, and that a white woman should reign as principal wife seemed hateful to her. It was to have been her place in the harem; her father had promised her that to tempt her to obedience of his plan, and she herself never doubted her ability to fill the place. The other women encouraged her. For themselves, they had given up hope, but this newcomer, so young, so exquisite, surely it would not be impossible for her to push aside the hated white stranger.

Now the news of Prince Ishaq Khan's return had spread among the harem women the evening before Bagoo carried it to Esther. They heard, too, Abdul's belief as to the white woman's re-installation into favour. Harem life gives little food for thought or conversation ; Abdul's news spread with the rapidity and excitement that a cat's visit produces in the neighbourhood of a dove cot.

The Cashmere girl listened to the shrill arguments, the muttered abuse and powerless threats of the other women against Esther, with scarcely veiled contempt. They were so quick to talk, so slow to act, these Harem born and bred women ; her free mind and hot heart rebelled against their dissatisfied nervelessness.

"This white devil may bear a son," was the chief cause of hopelessness, it appeared. *Bloom of the Rose,*

catching the words as she passed a group of women on the verandah steps, drew herself up erect and defiant.

" 'Tis for us to see, then, that the babe is not born in our midst," she said sharply, voicing a truth they had not even dared to think of. The women gaped at her in horror, only an elderly lady of the group taking it upon herself to remonstrate.

" Young blood runs too fast," she quavered. " You talk foolishness, child ; how can she be got rid of ? "

" And your blood runs thick like cream, from too much eating and sleeping," Bloom of the Rose retorted. " While you all sat round and bewailed your fate," she went on, " I have thought of a plan. Now I know how it can be done, and there is naught for you to do but keep silence."

She joined the group, sitting down near the old lady who had first spoken. " Listen," she said, " to-morrow there are to be dancing women here. I heard Abdul tell Bagoo of it ; they are to wait our Lord's pleasure, though, as like as not, he will not need them, Abdul says. Well, I am as they are and can speak their tongue, I will find a way to have speech with their leader, then thus shall the plan work." She leant forward impressively. " I will persuade them, for I have many jewels with which to tempt them, to smuggle forth the white woman in their midst when they leave. Then I will take her place, veiled in her clothes. It is not Abdul who will notice any difference between us, and when the message comes, as Bagoo says it will, that our lord awaits her in the Garden Palace, I—even I, will go in her place."

" He will kill you," one of the younger women gasped ; " have you no fear ? "

Bloom of the Rose tossed her head arrogantly and rose to her feet. " 'Tis my risk," she asserted. " I am too beautiful for a man to kill."

" Of a certainty if our Lord should but see you, and be not too greatly angered at the trick," a dark-browed woman who sat on the top step nursing a baby put in, " he would not think of the white slave again. But for years he has not looked at any of us ; it is as if the white folk had laid a spell on him."

" My spell shall break theirs then," whispered Bloom of the Rose. Her eyes looked out over their heads to beyond the harem walls. " Without courage we gain nothing in this world."

Courage she certainly did not lack. As she stood next day just within the chic of Esther's door and watched the scene before her, her lips smiled a little contemptuously. That a woman should weep as Esther wept, and cling to a fat, useless slave, such as Bagoo was, appeared to her foolish and degrading ; she was too young for pity to stir in her heart. When Bagoo turned to face her, dropping all the newly arranged pile of finery on the floor in her agitation, the smile changed to an open titter of amusement.

" What shameful talk is this, fat one, that I have overheard ? " she asked.

If Bagoo had not been taken completely by surprise, she would have realized that there was little use in Bloom of the Rose overhearing a conversation which had been conducted largely in English. As it was, the fat woman fell promptly into the trap.

" She would have me help her to escape," she explained hastily, anxious to shelve all blame from her shoulders,

"and I have been truly angered at the thought."

"Escape," murmured Bloom of the Rose. That Esther should be unwilling for the honour of chief wife had never entered the other women's heads. It would make things all the easier. The girl stepped a little nearer to Bagoo ; her eyes met the old woman's sternly.

"And why not?" she asked ; "it were a good deed and one that would give us all satisfaction."

"Satisfaction," grunted Bagoo, "it would be more like to give me a skinned back. I will have none of it." She stooped to re-gather her things.

"Let them lie," Bloom of the Rose commanded. "I may have need of them to help dress my sister later, and since thou art too great a coward to help," she caught the old woman by the shoulders and shook her, "get you gone and hold your peace at least. If there is aught said to Abdul, I will confront you before him and tell how I overheard you and this woman plotting her escape. Now go, and when they send you to fetch the white woman, have no fear, she shall be here ; I will keep better guard than you."

Bagoo might—indeed, would have resisted, but for the fact that it was getting late and near her meal time. She went, therefore, with many muttered uncomplimentary remarks as to upstarts from nowhere, who thought themselves queens, and Esther and the Cashmere girl were alone together.

Esther had not stirred ; she still knelt, crouching on the floor, as Bagoo had flung her. Her eyes stared at Bloom of the Rose, but they were wide and vacant. It seemed almost as if that last effort to win over Bagoo's help had been too much for the poor tired brain ; it had

given way under the weight of terror thrust upon it. Her rival returned the stare with interest, also with her hands behind her back, she made a quick sign against the evil eye. This white woman was mad, if her eycs showed the truth, and without doubt the ghost of the other white woman who had died in this room was somewhere near. Bloom of the Rose was no coward, but she was undoubtedly superstitious.

Then she advanced cautiously upon Esther. There was no need to enter upon any explanations ; the white woman would not have understood them, but she was passively obedient and slipped out of her garments and into the clothes that Bloom of the Rose selected for her. She sat quiet and contented too, only speaking softly to herself unknown English words, while the Cashmere girl braided up the heavy gold hair and stained the white face and hands. That accomplished, Bloom of the Rose stood up and having surveyed her work with satisfaction went quickly to the door again and peered out.

By the gateway of the harem she could see the group of dancing women. A certain amount of shrill voiced argument was in process, owing to the fact of Abdul having just informed them that their services would not be required that night, as the Prince had put off his arrival till the morrow. They clamoured, it was evident, for at least some payment, and even as Bloom of the Rose looked out Abdul flung himself free of the group and slouched off in the direction of the Palace. His departure provided the opportunity she had been waiting for, the verandahs and square were deserted save for the dancers. Like a flash she slipped from behind the chic and across the space to them. Evidently her argu-

ments and bribes had some effect for, after a quick conclave with the leader of the band, she turned, and the woman following her, re-crossed the space to Esther's room.

"I have drugged the woman," she announced standing by her handiwork, and arranging the veil carefully across Esther's head and shoulders, "so that she shall go quietly and give no trouble, and lo, how I recompense you for the night's work."

With reckless hands she stripped the ornaments from her neck and arms and held them out. The woman stolidly accepted the accumulated treasure, tying it into a tight knot at the end of her saree. Her shrewd eyes blinked from the Cashmere girl to Esther's mute figure and back again. There was more in the game than she had been told of, she knew, but after all it mattered very little to her, and the jewels more than blinded her to any risk she might be running. Therefore, she shrugged her shoulders without bothering to answer and, taking one of Esther's limp hands in hers, dragged her to her feet, and across the room to the door.

Bloom of the Rose stood to watch their progress, but well hidden by the chic. The light outside was beginning to fade; two minutes ago the sun had dropped behind the Bholpur forests; in a quarter of an hour it would be night. The group of women waiting at the gate were once more indulging in a wordy argument with Abdul, whose massive figure towered over them, but it was easy enough for Esther and her guide to join the rest unnoticed, for one of the women was holding the negro's attention by shrieking abuse at him. Bloom of the Rose saw the leader mutter some directions to the

women on the outskirts and between them they elbowed Esther well into the centre of the crowd, just as Abdul gave up the discussion and turned to open the gate. He grunted out some insulting humour as the women slipped in single file past him, and the leader answered quickly, bringing a shower of coarse jests on her ample shoulders and allowing Esther to be dragged past unnoticed. Instinctively, the white woman shrunk aside from the sound of the negro's voice, but otherwise she gave no sign at all, and as the door clanged to behind them, and Abdul moved away from it with a huge yawn and stretch, Bloom of the Rose let fall the chic with a little laugh that caught in her breath with a sob of satisfaction. So far, so well ; the first part of her plan had carried, it lay with her to make the second half as successful.

Not till they were some distance from the Palace, and had left behind them even the last straggling huts of the bazaar, did the dancing women turn aside from the broad high road they had so far been following. Their new way led them along a narrow footpath, between sun-dried rice fields, towards a cluster of mud huts grouped in the shade of a mango grove. The diminutive village was silent and dark, with only the faintest glimmer of light coming from one or two of the huts. The leader of the party stopped at a low door, from which one of these lights was issuing. So far she had walked with her hand on Esther's wrist, now she nodded a farewell to her companions and pushing Esther in front of her disappeared into the interior. The low thick smelling space was lighted by a lamp swung from the roof. An old woman rose to her feet as they entered, and turned a seamed and twisted face to greet them.

"Who have you there, daughter?" she asked, staring at Esther's curiously inert figure.

"I scarce know, mother," the other answered; "there has been money paid to me to hide the woman till the child is born, and that is all you or I care for, good money——" She put eager hands to the untying of her treasure.

The old woman shuffled nearer to Esther, and with a quick turn of her hand pulled the covering from head and face. In the lamp's dingy beams the tight braided hair showed gold, and the neck below where the brown stain ceased, was white, even to the bleared old eyes blinking at it, undeniably white.

The old woman fell back a pace or two. "Dost see what thou hast done," she gasped, clutching at her daughter's arm, "the woman is white."

Esther's eyes, wide and unafraid, watched them curiously. "It is a funny little place," she was whispering to herself, "but it doesn't really matter where one is when one is dead and every one else is dead, too." Then she smiled rather wistfully at the dirty old hag. "I am tired," she said, holding out her hands; "tired, I should like to sleep, if dead people are allowed to sleep here."

The younger woman had gone instinctively to the door standing by it as if to block out any chance onlooker.

"Without doubt she is white," she admitted; "all the more reason she should be well hidden."

"You have brought her from the Harem of the Prince?" the old woman queried. She had retreated from Esther's outstretched hands. "Woe is upon us that you should have done this."

"The deed is done, anyway," the other answered; she

jerked her shoulders, "and we must see to it that no worse follows. The woman is here and stays here for the present. Give her thy bed for to-night, mother ; she will sleep and keep quiet."

The old woman with many mutterings repaired to the furthest and darkest corner of the room, beckoning Esther to follow her. A charpoi, roughly covered with a rezi, stood there, and pushing Esther on to it she pantomimed for her the act of lying down and sleeping. Esther watched, laughing softly.

"Yes, I will sleep," she said, nodding her head wisely ; "the grave gives time for rest when we are in it. I remember reading that somewhere ; this is the grave, and I shall sleep well in it."

The old woman, her task accomplished, shuffled back to her daughter, who had left the door and was examining the plunder under the lamp.

"If the woman is to die," she whispered, nodding her head in the direction of the charpoi, "it must be after the babe is born. I will have no ghost of one laden with new birth to haunt us."

"Who talks of killing," the younger one answered sharply ; "there may be even more money to make from this after the child is born, but we must go carefully, mother. It were well that no one should know that she is white."

And while the two women discussed and made their plans for the future, Esther slept, and the kindly veil of forgetfulness went with her into her sleep. She was a child again, with no surprise in the thought, laughing the laughter of childhood at childish things. Ishaq Khan, Gerald, her marriage, the life in the harem, were all

forgotten incidents. It was to be many days before their memory stirred to life again, and then it was to be through the gates of death that her reason should be restored to her.

CHAPTER XXVII

“ It knows not wrath nor pardon ; utter true
Its measures mete, its faultless balance weighs ;
Times are as naught, to-morrow it will judge
Or after many days.”

Sir Edwin Arnold.

YOUNG DONALDSON' put in a strenuous week of amusement in the hills and returned to Bholpur to find the first rains just on the verge of breaking. Thunder clouds lay banked on every horizon, the heat was intense, damply intense as Brown styled it during one of the many pauses he had to make to mop his brow while playing billiards.

“ Been wiling away the hearts of all the maidens, young man,” he asked Donaldson in passing.

“ Of course,” the youth assented. He leant across the table and deftly knocked the red ball into the pocket. “ That is what is expected of one when one is an interesting invalid on sick leave. How have things been here ? ”

“ Smouldering,” retorted Brown. “ That is the only word that can be used to describe even peacefulness in the hot weather here. As a matter of fact, we have been peaceful, haven’t we ? ” He nodded at McDermot.

“ Yes,” the Resident agreed, “ things have been very quiet. Every one is at peace with every one else, even in the Palace, as far as we can gather.”

“ The Prince back ? ” Donaldson asked.

McDermot nodded. "Yes," he said; "he is back and most friendly and amiable."

"The reason being," Brown put in, "a new and entirely satisfactory wife. That bit of intelligence McDermot had gathered from Rutna. Where Rutna gets it is another matter; he is generally reliable, though."

"News travels in India. Sometimes it almost seems as if the stones and dust had speech," Lyall put in. "Even our Mission is buzzing with reports of this new favourite in the Palace, a Cashmere girl of extraordinary beauty. I don't fancy anything is ever kept a secret from the native servants."

"They keep some secrets to themselves, though," McDermot retorted drily. "Even Rutna knows far more about every piece of information than he ever passes on to me. Ra Chandra is dead, by the way," he went on, turning to Donaldson.

"Poor old Ra Chandra. Has any one seen anything of the brother since I have been away?"

"He is lying very low for the present," McDermot answered. "I would let him rest if I were you, Donaldson, unless, of course, he looks you up. It is only natural he should feel a bit bitter about the whole show."

Despite such words of wisdom, uttered by one for whom he had an unbounded respect, Donaldson reserved his own opinion as to what he hoped to do in the way of reclaiming Ra Chandra's brother, and it was with an odd thrill of something like pride that he noted, as he stepped out on to the verandah after his solitary meal a week later, a tall, lanky, well-remembered figure rising to greet him. The police-orderly in attendance salaamed gravely and, indicating the waiting figure with a somewhat

suspicious glance, informed his master that the boy desired speech with him.

Donaldson took in the scene quickly, motioning the man aside, and holding out a frank hand to Narrhotum.

"It is good of you to come and see me," he said. "I was half hoping you would. Come inside, or shall we stay here and smoke and talk?"

The boy's mournful face lit up, the sullen mouth smiled a little.

"We will sit here, if you choose," he answered, scrupulously careful in his pronunciation of the foreign words.

"Good," said Donaldson; "we will have a lamp brought out and some drinks. Can't offer you anything, can I?" Narrhotum gave a polite dissent. "Then we will pack off the servants and have a chat. Won't you have even a cigar, in which to smoke a pipe of peace?"

But Narrhotum would have nothing. He sat stiffly erect in his chair while the servants brought out the lamp and tables, his eyes moodily fixed on the floor. Once Donaldson glanced at him; he felt the atmosphere a little strained and wondered whether he would really be quite wise to send off all the orderlies and be left alone with the boy. The thought only lasted a second and at Narrhotum's first words, it fled ashamed.

"You speak of a pipe of peace, huzoor. I am not ignorant of your English proverbs; there has never been anything but peace 'twixt you and me."

"I am glad," said Donaldson. He sat forward in his chair, his clear blue eyes smiling at the boy. "I knew you would be very cut up over your brother's death,

and I thought perhaps in some way you would bear us a grudge."

He laid some stress on the word "us." He wanted Narrhotum to understand that he stood for and with the Government. The native's eyes met his for a moment.

"No," he said, "I bear no grudge. I have learnt many things during my brother's exile," he went on; "one is, that his way of fighting for our country was a wrong way; not so shall we free her. I do not give up the fight he laid down his life for, huzoor, only I take to myself other weapons."

"That's right," agreed Donaldson, "you never will get much further with bombings and murders; it isn't playing, well—cricket, shall we say?"

Narrhotum nodded gravely. "I too have played the cricket," he said, "in my school days."

He added nothing to that cryptic sentence, and for a time the two sat in silence.

"What do you propose doing now?" Donaldson asked presently. "If I may advise you, I should get away from here, and if there is anything I can do to help you, you will let me know, won't you?"

"I shall not leave here," Narrhotum answered. His eyes looked past the Englishman into the darkness outside. "There is only one act I live to accomplish, and that I shall do here. After that I have no care, no need of care." He stood up abruptly and Donaldson rose too.

"You don't mean——" he began. Narrhotum interrupted, though with perfect courtesy.

"Not what you are thinking of, huzoor. I have learnt wisdom did I not say. But there is yet one thing I can

do to help my cause and my brother's memory, and that I will do, but it is nothing against the Government, else should I not be here. There is another word I had for your ear, that in some measure brought me here to-night. Can I speak as to you alone?"

Donaldson looked round him. Some distance off crouched the orderly on duty, half asleep; the other servants had betaken themselves to their quarters. "Why, yes," he said, "especially as we speak in English."

Narrhotum smiled. It was so essentially sahib-like to think that native eavesdroppers would trouble to listen if they could not understand the language spoken. He contented himself, however, by drawing a little nearer and dropping his voice.

"What I will tell you now," he said, "is spoken in friendliness and to repay in some small measure your goodness to me. My knowledge is the common gossip of the bazaar, but without doubt, unknown to you white folk, yet it is none the less true and will be of some interest to the Resident sahib at least. The white woman, who was in the harem of the Prince a short time back, and who is supposed to have died, is not dead; she escaped or was smuggled out of the harem, and is at present hidden in one of the outlying villages. More I cannot tell you, for I do not know."

He ended his harangue and drew himself up proudly. Donaldson stared at him blankly.

"White woman—harem," he said. Some misgivings as to his companion's sanity occurred to him. "I haven't the slightest idea what you are driving at."

"No,"—the man seemed a little disappointed—"it is

information for which the Resident sahib will give much, I know, therefore I brought it to you."

"Thanks, awfully." Donaldson felt that thanks were due. "The matter shall be looked into. By Jove, the Prince's harem and a white woman sounds unbelievable, doesn't it?"

Narrhotum took the assertion gravely. "As one of your English poets has it," he said. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' Salaam, huzoor, and peace go with you."

"Salaam, Narrhotum," Donaldson answered, "come and see me again if you stay on in Bholpur. I am nearly always by myself of an evening."

"What quaint bee has he got in his bonnet this time," he meditated, as he turned indoors after watching the boy's figure stride away. "Shall have to pull old McDermot's leg about it though; fancy him being interested in the goings on of the harem."

As Fate ordained, McDermot happened to be away on a ten days' shooting trip, and Donaldson's information was therefore passed on to Brown instead the next day.

"Ever heard anything to the effect of a white woman in the Prince's harem?" Donaldson asked casually, in the course of their conversation.

Brown lifted a slightly frowning glance. Having succeeded in silencing McDermot's mad theories, here apparently, was some one else starting them.

"Yes," he answered somewhat shortly, "there was an unfortunate white woman who died there some time ago."

"Extraordinary thing." Donaldson was visibly

excited. "Old Ra Chandra's brother paid me a visit last night, and he was full of some mysterious yarn about a white woman whom every one thought dead, but who wasn't, as a matter of fact, and who had escaped or been turned out, and was in hiding somewhere in the district.

"Nonsense," Brown snorted, "this particular woman died, anyway. Miss Lyall was sent in by McDermot to inspect the dead body. The bazaar is always full of awe-inspiring tales if you listen."

"Yes," agreed Donaldson meekly. "I didn't place much faith in it myself, only it struck me as odd, a white woman, you know."

"India is all odd," Brown hunched his shoulders, "and some of her oddnesses don't bear inspecting."

Donaldson, with Brown's verdict of the matter impressed on his mind, was content to let it drop there, and passed on his information to McDermot on the Resident's return rather by way of a joke.

"Ra Chandra's brother had a message for you, sir, when he looked me up the other night. He said he was sure it would interest you."

"Really," asked McDermot. The four men were sitting out under the banyan tree near the tennis court. "What sort of message?"

Brown, apparently deep in a discussion with Lyall as to the merits and demerits of the American serve, cocked his ear to hear how McDermot would take Donaldson's chaff.

"Well," the young man was saying, "his message as it was given ran something like this. The white woman, who was in the harem a short while back, and who is

supposed to have died, is not dead ; she escaped or was smuggled out of the harem, and is at present hiding in one of the outlying villages."

Silence followed his words, for Lyall, observing that Brown's attention had wandered, broke off in his argument to listen too. They were all somehow looking at McDermot. The Resident sat forward in his chair, his hand half outstretched for a whisky peg he had been about to pick up. He looked like some one who has suddenly received, in the very middle of quite calm commonplace thoughts, a terrible knowledge.

"My God," he whispered, and his lips were stiff on the sounds.

Brown leant forward. "What is up, Resident ?" he asked ; "feeling ill ?"

Lyall and Donaldson stood up ; the young policeman's face had flushed, he was conscious of some uneasiness.

"Is there anything in what I have said, sir," he asked. "Dr. Brown told me it was all bunkum ; the woman did die, I thought—"

McDermott interrupted. "When did you hear this ?" he asked.

"Nine days ago," Donaldson answered.

"And you have done nothing ?"

"What was there to do," Brown put in. "Do you place any faith in the story, McDermot ; you know bazaar tales and how much truth there is in them."

"This one is true," McDermot answered slowly. There was that in his voice that silenced arguments. "I have known it all the time," he went on ; "that is the ghastly part of it, and prudence, caution, a desire not to mix myself up in what might have proved unpleasant,

had kept me from dealing with it. That is over though." He stood up abruptly and turned to Donaldson. "We will find her," he said, "if we have to ransack every house in the district. I can count on your help, Donaldson ? "

"Rather, sir," Donaldson spoke eagerly. "But if you know the woman, who is she, how did it all happen ? "

Once more Brown intervened. "No need to ask or say who she is as yet, is there ? " His eyes met McDermot's. "Time for all that when she is found, if she is found."

"Cautious as ever," McDermot nodded. "On this point we will let your wisdom stand. It doesn't matter who she is, does it ; it is enough for us that she is white, and that she is certainly as much in need of our help as any one could be. Let's get to work, Donaldson ; you can organize a search party, find the boy who told you for me first if you can ; he can probably help us. Publish abroad what we are looking for—secrecy is of no further use, we must find her, and the open way will be the quickest. I'll have Rutna up and see what he knows."

His first action, however, on reaching his bungalow, was to write to the Hamiltons. To the man he said, "May I ask you to pay us another visit ; you must be dead sick of me and of Bholpur, but this time the reason is more imperative than I care to put on paper."

To Mrs. Hamilton he explained a little more. "I have written asking your husband to do me a great favour and spend ten days or so in this unsalubrious spot. It is you I really want ; if this letter seems strange to you will you throw your memory back to the last interview we had in Shillong, and what passed between us there.

This matter has to do with that ; I think you will understand."

Then he sent for Rutna, having handed his two letters over to an orderly to post.

"Rutna, the police sahib has told me," he said, "of some rumour that is going about the bazaar, as to a white mem who has escaped from the Prince's harem. What truth is there in it ? "

Rutna gazed round him. As he had once said to Shahjahan, his sahib was as knowing as the All Powerful. Of what use to lie in such a presence.

"I have heard it," he assented gravely.

"Well," asked McDermot.

"As to where she is," Rutna continued, "that no one knows."

"She must be found," McDermot ordered him ; "let this be understood throughout the bazaar. My honour stands on it, there shall be no punishment, only great reward for whosoever gives word of her. What do they gain by keeping her in hiding."

Rutna lifted his eyes at such a question. "Huzoor, there is the Prince," he said.

"What can he do ? " asked McDermot, "in this matter. What would he do ; is he more powerful than the British Raj ? "

Rutna might have mentioned Narayan ; it was a little incident that would have shown clearly enough the powerlessness of the British Raj to protect those who had offended against the Prince. Why he did not is a question that can be answered only by some one with a thorough knowledge of the invincible secrecy that guards a native's brain. And, at any rate, further discussion

was prevented, for at that moment a furious rider could be heard galloping up the front drive of the Residency and pulling up with a clatter of hoofs outside. Donaldson's voice, sharp with excitement, rang through the bungalow.

"McDermot," he shouted, "are you there, can I see you for a moment."

The Resident was already on the verandah. "You have news?" he asked eagerly.

"Not of that matter,"—Donaldson flung the reins on the pony's neck and jumped off,—"but there is a row at the Palace; the Prince has been murdered, they say, but we can't get in or gather any official statement, the bazaar is up. I have wired for the soldiers and dashed round here to fetch you, they may let you pass."

"Murdered?" asked Brown, he had joined the other two men on the verandah. "Any notion who has done it, or why?"

"Not a word, so far, but you can hear the tumult if you listen." Donaldson held up his hand, and faintly an indescribable hum, like the sounds of a gathering thunderstorm, reached them.

McDermot had turned into the house. "Fetch the pony round, Rutna," he ordered. "I'll get into uniform and come along with you now, Donaldson, we'll take the police guard, can pick them up on the way. I don't suppose there is much danger. Every one has lost their head probably, that's the noise you hear."

"I'll come too," remarked Brown, "may be wanted with my bag. It would be just my luck if I was called on to fetch a fellow like the Prince back from the jaws of a death he no doubt deserves."

Rutna stood on the steps and watched the three sahibs

ride away. Not until then did he voice his thoughts as to the exciting events in progress.

"It is the vengeance of Ra Chandra," he muttered. His eyes were on the glow of light that shone out from the Palace on to the surrounding blackness. "The hand of Fate," he added philosophically. Then he turned back into the house to get the bath water ready, and lay out his master's clothes preparatory to his return, for kingdoms might rise and fall, but his sahib's comfort must be seen to ; that was Rutna's creed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

“ By this the slayer’s knife did stab himself
The unjust judge hath lost his own defender :
The false tongue dooms its lie ; the creeping thief
And spoiler rob, to render.”—*Edwin Arnold.*

IN the front room of the Garden Palace, Narrhotum crouched beside the body of the man he had killed. To escape had never even entered his head ; he was indifferent, now that the burning sense of injustice in his heart was satisfied, as to what possible fate might lie in store for himself. More than personal revenge had lain behind the knife stab, for Ishaq Khan, on that day when he had so scornfully sided with power and authority, had wronged something far greater than pride or brotherly affection, he had hit at the Cause ; he had openly turned from it, preferring that all else should go to the wall provided his own reputation was saved. And the Cause had been life, soul and religion to Ra Chandra. His brother knew that, knew also of the broken heart that had lain behind Ra Chandra’s last illness. So the blow had had much to wing it. Narrhotum would give his life—English justice would certainly demand that of him—for the honour of his dead brother and the Cause.

He and the body were alone in the wide dark room save for a third figure that squatted by the head of the

corpse gabbling strange uncouth sounds in the stillness. The Prince had taken sight and speech from Narrayan, he had left him hearing and touch, and Narrayan's twisted lips, his inarticulate heart was shouting a song of joy, because his ears had heard the hoarse cry, the harsh sobbing breath of Ishaq Khan as he died. His hands too could feel the warm red blood that had oozed and trickled from the form beside him, and for the time being he had gone mad with the glory of revenge satisfied.

Narrhotum paid no attention to his uncanny companion ; his eyes were in a fixed stare on the tank outside. The late rains—for the first thunderstorm had burst two days ago—had refilled it ; green things were budding to life on its surface, showing as mysterious shadows under the moonlight. It was a vividly moonlit night ; the steps and pillars of the house, the bordering of the tank, shone white like polished ivory. From beyond the trees, very faintly he could hear the noises of the Palace and bazaar, his lips were scornful as he listened ; they had left him alone with their dead to fight one and all over his possessions. Even the beautiful Cashmere girl who had been with Ishaq Khan in the room had fled shrieking at the first stab, and had not yet returned. Such is the love of woman, communed the boy to himself.

He and Narrayan had come by paths the latter knew well to the Garden Palace, and they had crept up the steps and were practically in the room before Ishaq Khan had seen them. He had been lying back on the couch that had been Esther's, watching the Cashmere girl's figure as she swayed and postured before him in a dance. All the lamps had been put out, the girl danced like

some fantastic flower in the bright shaft of moonlight that lay across the room, and as Narrhotum entered he darkened for a moment with his shadow the effect. That was when Ishaq Khan saw them, he had risen with an oath and the girl, her draperies gathered round her had crouched back screaming at the figure that followed behind Narrhotum !

That was all ; Ishaq Khan had time for no more. He made—Narrhotum remembered with regret—no effort to save himself ; the attack was so thoroughly unexpected ; he was probably a little heavy with drink ; he had just taken that one step forward and Narrhotum had leapt on him, lifting the knife high, plunging it in far, wrenching it out and in again. Then the figure before him had swayed and fallen, and Narayan was upon it, mouthing his delight, dabbling his hands in the life blood of the man he had so good a cause to hate.

The girl had scarce waited for that ; she had gone running wildly into the trees towards the Palace and shrieking again and again. Well, they would come back again presently, all of them, when they had decided who was to be the next ruler, and they would find him, Narrhotum, waiting there beside the thing he had done, and they would send for the Police sahib for him as they had for his brother, and this time English justice would hang him, of a certainty it would, even though he had rid the British Raj of one of its worst enemies. He did not care very much ; he was not afraid of death, and he died for the Cause.

Meanwhile, the Palace itself was a scene of indescribable confusion. The Prince had been murdered, by whom ? by what ? According to Bloom of the Rose's shrieking

tale, by demons who had flown in out of the wood—fearful demons with no eyes, but foaming terrible mouths and groping hands. That account in itself was sufficient to deter investigation by the domestics, and Muzfat was too busy gathering the reins of authority into his own hands. This was the time his cunning brain thought—for the revolt. The bazaar people would be more than ready to rise and wipe out the English, provided he could get the proper tale circulated as to the Prince's death, then, should the rising miscarry, who would be to blame? The people would have heard a mistaken rumour, and have been carried away by their grief for a much loved master. And if it succeeded, therein lay Muzfat's chance; there was no direct heir to the kingdom, he himself would lay claim to it. Who was there who would be able to take the power from him once the British Raj had been wiped out.

Meanwhile, the Palace Gates remained closed, and McDermot, Brown and Donaldson on their arrival were met by an agitated and turbulent mob of bazaar ruffians ready at all costs to oppose admission. It seemed useless to pit the small force they had, consisting of twenty men and one constable, against the seething mass of agitators, and Brown, anyway, was for a diplomatic retreat, and a return on the arrival of soldiers from the next station. Donaldson, on the other hand, was rather in favour of violent measures, such as ordering the police to fire, and risking the consequence. McDermot chose a middle course. The party halted some short distance from the gates, and the Resident, looking truly imposing in his official uniform, went forward alone to address the enemy. If they saw any sign of armed violence from

the other side, the police were to close round him to open fire at once, but not in any case till he should give the order.

The wild imprecations and yells rather died down as that solitary figure advanced. For one thing, a revolutionary crowd is always apt to imagine that there is some good, to them unknown, reason behind courage which takes up such a position, and for another there were a good few among the throng who were more than a little undecided which party to join. McDermot advanced to well within speaking distance, and though his presence was not exactly acclaimed with favour no hand was raised in the crowd.

"There is trouble in the Palace," he said, his words ringing clear and calm across the silence that had fallen. "We must be allowed to pass. You are laying up much punishment for yourself; such doings are not lightly dealt with by the Government. I order you to disperse and get to your homes, or if you are clamouring for justice on the murderer of your Prince, stay here quietly and you shall see justice carried out."

A little whispered stir answered his words. Shahjahan's brother-in-law, well on the outskirts of the crowd, raised his voice in favour of obedience. "Without doubt the Regiment is on its way here," he added to those near him, "of what use to fight." . . .

The throng obviously lacked a leader, though one spokesman took upon himself to answer.

"It is an Englishman that has murdered our Prince," he shouted. "Only the blood of the white will repay that."

His words roused a storm of threats. The crowd

swayed towards McDermot. Donaldson and his men drew near ready for the word of command.

"If it is a white man who has done the deed,"—McDermot's voice sounded sharp with anger now; those on the outskirts of the crowd were not slow to realize that,—“he shall pay for it in the same way, but it must be by the road of justice, not murder. Have done with this foolishness, let me pass, before worse befall you.”

Prompted by the peaceful faction in its midst the crowd hesitated and wavered. One voice suddenly called out in favour of justice—the justice of the sahibs, and on a sudden the majority took up the cry; the few who raised dissenting shouts could hardly be heard above the tumult of acclamation.

“The sahib log and the police have been admitted,” was the message brought to Muzfat, “what shall be done now.”

“Lead them to the Garden Palace,” was Muzfat’s order. “I myself will follow in due course.”

He waited behind to gather together the final shreds of his enterprise and play the last card. Only Brown noted his absence with some uneasiness, but since it was not his show, and he was in no sense the leader, he refrained from mentioning it. Their advance on the Garden Palace under the bright hard moonlight was conducted silently; the hub-bub of the Palace had hushed itself on their entrance; now, though only two men could be found brave enough to lead the way, the rest of the servants and retainers followed in a scared group at the back. Their voices had fallen to whispers, only the steady wailing of the women from the harem rose and fell on the air.

Donaldson spread his men out a little as the delicate stone carved house came in sight, but there was no need for this precaution. Narrhotum was waiting for them, indifferent and slightly scornful, by the Prince's body.

He rose to his feet on the entrance of law and authority and salaamed gravely, the wet red blade still in his hand.

"I surrender," he said, speaking in his own tongue that all might understand, "to the justice of the English. I have wreaked my justice on the man who lies here." Then his eyes met Donaldson's as the young policeman stepped forward to handcuff him, and he smiled because of the reluctance in his friend's eyes. "It is of no matter, huzoor," he said, "I am content it should be so."

Brown had crossed over to the Prince's body and was kneeling on the floor by it, while two of the police at a word from McDermot lit the lamps. The doctor's hands, quick and deft at their work, passed over the body, touched for a moment on the clammy face, closing the eyes, then he stood up.

"Quite dead," he said, "must have been instantaneous with the first knife-thrust." His eyes suddenly became aware of Narayan's figure illuminated by the newly lit lamps. "Good God!" he exclaimed, "what in the name of heaven is that!"

There was some cause for the agitation in his voice, for Narayan fronted them, his hideous eyeless sockets, his maimed mouth and groping hands smeared and flecked with blood, the front of his loincloth where he had pressed against the Prince was soaked in it too, it dripped and trickled to the floor as he stood. The

room, though the three Englishmen hardly noticed that, was fast clearing of the Palace folk, only the small band of police remained and they apparently preferred the verandah to the room in which Narrayan stood. Narrhotum answered Brown's question for him.

"That is Narrayan," he explained, "he had nothing to do with the murder, I alone did it, but when the Prince fell he could contain his joy no longer but leapt on the body, hence the bloodstains."

"But why, what——" asked McDermot; Donaldson had gone a little white.

"He had cause to hate the Prince," Narrhotum put in courteously, "more cause some will say than I had; his face as you see it now is what the justice of the Prince made of it."

"Do you mean——" asked McDermot, but Brown interrupted, he had gone a little nearer to Narrayan, his practised eyes studying the scarred face.

"It's true," he whispered; "my God, McDermot, I didn't think such things could be true, the man has had his eyes burned out and his tongue torn from his mouth. It's horrible, the agony he must have suffered. Let him go free, you can't think of detaining him on a charge of murder in the face of this."

"There is no talk of murder," Narrhotum's voice intervened, "I alone slew the Prince, Narrayan had no share in that."

"Huzoor," one of the policemen stepped forward, "the man speaks true as to Narrayan, we of the bazaar knew of it. That," he indicated the cowering figure, "is the justice of the Prince."

A chorus of acclamation broke from the group on the

verandah, one or two of the men spat vindictively at the Prince's name.

McDermot turned to Donaldson. "When will we begin to know natives," he said in English; then in the vernacular, "Tell him to go free, we will look into his case later, but for the present send some one with him to convey him in safety beyond the Palace walls. If he fears further dealings from the Palace, take him to the Residency, he will be safe there. Now, Brown," he turned to the doctor, "if you are satisfied with your examination we had better get the body carried over to the Palace and try and find out what Muzfat is up to."

Narayan and the policeman deputed to escort him had hardly been gone five minutes, however, before the latter returned, running hard across the moonlit space.

"Huzoor, we are surrounded," was his information, "they march on us from the Palace, many hundreds strong, and armed. They called on me to surrender, saying they wanted not to shed our blood but only the blood of the whites, but it is not thus I serve the salt I have eaten. So I broke and ran, but Narayan hath gone on."

The other men crowded round him, but not one dissenting voice went up against his action, and they were prepared to stand evidently on the orders of their *sahibs*.

"I feared it," said Narrhotum from his corner: the passing events interested him but slightly, only he would rather have died at the hands of the English than at the pleasure of Muzfat.

McDermott's quick eyes had taken in their chances of defence even while he listened.

"We have arms and a few rounds of ammunition," he said, "and can hold the place for a couple of hours, anyway; station your men at the doors and windows, Donaldson, make what barricades you can, there is damned little furniture. The soldiers ought to be here under a couple of hours, and Rutna will hurry them up when they do arrive."

"You trust Rutna, and these," asked Brown, his eyes indicated the policemen who were already busy dragging the one large table across the centre entrance.

Donaldson, though the question was not addressed to him, flushed hotly. "I would trust them with more than my life, sir," he said, turning to McDermot.

The Resident nodded gravely, "And I too, Donaldson; pay no attention to Brown, he doesn't trust because he has always lacked love for this country or anything that belongs to it. In this case," he very nearly grinned at Brown, the humour of it having just dawned on him, "there is no one else we can trust. Now then, ready, men, I gather that the first detachment of the horde is advancing; don't shoot unless you must."

Despite the careful shooting of the defenders there were rather more lives lost during the memorable riot around the Garden Palace than had ever been recorded before in the annals of Bholpur. It is to be believed that among the hordes of bazaar folk urged forward into the fight by Muziat, not a few chose this opportunity to settle old scores against their personal enemies. A great many deaths, so Brown decided afterwards, could not be accounted for by the muskets of the police, and the relieving soldiers fired scarcely a shot. These last named in fact found on their arrival but little work

to do, a great many bodies to pick up, and a rabble of terrified though still noisy bazaar folk to herd back to their homes. Few arrests were made, McDermot fancied the bazaar had learnt its lessons without any further teaching, the one person whose blood he really thirsted for, since he was without doubt responsible for all the trouble, was Muzfat, and Muzfat had unaccountably disappeared. Remained then merely the formality of taking in charge one or two of the most important Palace officials, having the Prince's body conveyed to the palace, and seeing that law and order was restored with a firm hand among the Palace precincts.

The soldiers, under the charge of Hodgson, a grave overgrown subaltern, who habitually went by the name of the Baby Elephant in his regiment, remained on duty at the Palace ; Donaldson, his handful of police the heroes of the hour, Narrhotum and the rest of the prisoners departed jailwards, Brown and McDermot were left to make their way at their leisure to the Residency.

"Government may be annoyed with me over this wholesale slaughter," commented McDermot over breakfast in the early hours of the morning, "but I don't see what else we could have done."

"No fear of that," Brown answered, "you know that at the present you are Sir John's pet lamb and I should imagine Government would be grateful to you for finally pricking the troublesome bubble of the Bholpur state. There is no one to follow after Ishaq Khan, is there ?"

"He has left no direct heir," acknowledged the Resident, "there will be hundreds of claimants."

"That will settle it," Brown helped himself largely

to marmalade, "Government will annex Bholpur, feudatory states are an everlasting plague to the Government."

Day dawned to find peace reigning in Palace and Bazaar, a peace which emanated from the quiet dead who lay in rows along the Garden Palace verandahs, which sheltered too the principal figure, stretched out stiff and silent in the state-room of the Palace. For Ishaq Khan lay in state, so much had been accorded to him by the guardians of the peace, his retainers had spread royal robes over and above him, the mournful priests had bathed and perfumed his body. So he slept, a king robed in all his glories, looking more kingly now than he had ever looked in life, much that was hateful smoothed from his face by death, the scornful, quiet eyelids shut over the rebellious eyes. And because the man's sin-twisted, hate-warped soul had left it, the body showed a beautiful, fine mask in death.

CHAPTER XXIX

Mine is the Fountain—and Mine the Force
That spurs all Nature to endless strife;

And My image is Death at the gates of Life.

Sir Alfred Lyall.

THE night upon which Ishaq Khan was murdered Esther's child was born—ushered into the world, a small white body, with all the pomp and ceremony that attends the mystery of birth amongst even the lowest castes of India. It is the woman's hour, and in a land where women are so much in subjection she makes the best of this her one victory over the mastery of man. So to attend the birth of this small white stranger in their midst all the old village wives had gathered together, the woman in whose house she was taking an important part of nurse and doctor in one. Most of the village knew by this time the secret of Esther's presence in the hut, even that she was white had leaked out, and to-night as they sat huddled round the charpoy on which the object of their attentions lay, the women were discussing the reward which, so gossip had it, the Resident of Bholpur was offering to whomsoever should give information with regard to the white woman.

"Thou wilt claim it, Maham, is it not so, once the child is born?" one of them ventured.

"That I know not," the wizened owner of the hut

retorted, "it rests with my daughter. For myself I would have naught to do with such things, rewards may bring punishments in their wake."

"Aye, that is true," agreed another in the group.

Maham rose to wipe Esther's face with a wet rag. The birth was long in coming, the woman suffered over much, her practised eye could note that. "If it were me," she added in continuation of the subject, "after the babe is born I would take the woman and lead her some distance in the direction of the Residency, there leave her. They will thus find her, the search will cease and no blame attach to any of us."

"A good plan," agreed the first speaker; "will thy daughter agree?"

The older woman shrugged her shoulders. "Who knows?" she said, "to-night she has gone to the Palace to find out if aught is to be gained from the Prince. She has ever a keen eye for money, my daughter."

Esther meanwhile, in the dimness of her fancied world, imagining herself still dead, knew that she had come now to hell and all its tortures. She suffered horribly, great waves of pain sweeping over her, half lulling feeling at their height, retreating and leaving exquisite knowledge of their agony as they went. But as on those occasions when Ishaq Khan had tried to rouse some cry for mercy from her, so now she faced this agony silently, it drove her back as it were on herself, and whatever other qualities had been lacking in her make-up, physical courage had not been among them.

The women were not over astonished at her fortitude, physical pain is very stoically borne in the East, especially by the women, but even they were moved to pity

as the long night continued and still no sign of relief came to the sufferer. They did their best for her in their rough practical way, forcing her once or twice to her feet, making her walk up and down the short length of the hut, but in the end all the skill and precepts they knew of failed before such stubborn agony and they were forced to leave her to fight the battle out alone. And Esther fought, going down to the gates of Death and turning again as the very far-off faint cry of newborn life reached to her heart through a mist of deadness that at the last struggle had mercifully closed round her. And with that cry in her ears, while slowly, slowly through centuries of pain her spirit struggled back to life, the mists lifted also from her brain and she knew herself again, remembering step by step the path she had taken since that evening when she had knelt by Gerald's side on the balcony of the hotel in London.

"I think if I could have a son to grow into a man like you," she had said, "I should be proud."

That incident stood out clear in the shadowed mind, the rest her meeting with Ishaq Khan, her flight through the night, the Garden Palace, her life in the harem, her period of forgetfulness all passed before her like a dream. She had no memory of the time that had intervened since Abdul had given her his message of the Prince's return, she supposed herself to be still in the harem and her child had been born—that she knew because of the cry which had caught her soul at the gates of Death and forced it to turn back. Her child and Gerald's, but at the time she had not known, her heart pleaded with itself for so much justification; and afterwards, when knowledge had come to her it had been too late,

surely that would be urged in her favour, too late, the path had been closed behind her, Gerald had let it be understood by their world at any rate that she was dead.

And dead she should remain, she was content with the justice of that, only this small soul whose wail sounded in her ears, it was alive, it must be given its chance, she must do something to save it from death. With a great effort she pushed the waves of thought and sleep from her and opened her eyes, putting out her hands instinctively to feel for the babe that should lie near her.

"That is well," grunted Mother Maham ; with one hand she brushed the damp sweat from her brow, she had fought the battle with death almost as strenuously as Esther, "she lives, sisters, praise to Shiva ; now for the water, throw it gently, she is still weak."

To be deluged with cold water immediately one has passed through a crisis such as Esther's would seem sufficient under ordinary circumstances to kill a European. The women of the East are of stronger build, it would seem ; it is their method of assisting the process of Nature on these occasions. If the woman is strong enough they force her to a standing position and butt her with their heads, if she is too weak for such treatment they sit her up and deluge her with cold water. It does not in most cases kill her, it did not kill Esther ; in fact after the first gasp it rather strengthened her, she could at any rate think more clearly. After she had been dried and dressed once more, they laid her back on the bed and left her ; she could see them very busy over something in the opposite corner of the hut. Was it the baby, she wondered, why didn't they bring

it to her, how had they hushed its cries, for it was very silent and the women gathered round it spoke to each other in hushed whispers. Perhaps it slept, and though her heart and arms ached physically to hold it, she controlled herself. She had learnt during her life in the harem that a want expressed was tantamount to having it denied, with punishment to follow for the expression ; she was not afraid for herself, but a new dread had sprung to life in her heart, she feared inexpressibly for her child. So she lay and watched, and once when Mother Maham drew nigh to look at her, she closed her eyes and feigned sleep, she had no wish for any further ministrations.

When she opened her eyes again cautiously, it was to find that the women had dispersed from the corner and were gathered round the door welcoming some newcomer, a tall, bronze-faced woman with wide shoulders and hips. She was dressed in the full-plaited skirts of the dancing-girls, and the saree usually worn over the head had been thrown back showing the thickly oiled hair plaited with gold thread. She was handsome in a bold, impudent way, Esther wondered whom she could be, she had no recollection of ever having seen her before. One fact more than anything else drew her attention, the woman had stood for a moment or two in the open door dramatically, as one with important information to impart, and through the opening Esther had caught a glimpse of purple sky with—and herein lay the astonishment—the dark shadows of trees thrown against it. There were no trees to be seen from within the high-walled harem - what lay outside, where was she ?

The woman moved abruptly into the centre of the hut, she scarce glanced at Esther, her eyes swept to the further corner of the room and rested on what the women had left there, a pathetically small stiff figure, covered with a cloth.

"Well?" she asked, speaking sharply.

"'Tis not well," her mother grunted in answer; she spoke slowly, but the language was unknown to Esther. "The woman lives, true enough, but the babe is dead."

All the women made the sign, averting the evil eye.

"It cried once, ere it passed away," one of them put in quickly, "that averts some of the evil, sister."

"Evil," the last comer shrugged her stout shoulders, "it is not that sort of evil we need fear." She walked over to the bundle on the floor and stooping jerked the cloth from it. "'Tis white, too, as I thought," she muttered, straightening herself with a jerk. Then she stepped across to Esther and peered into the white face, the tight-closed eyes. "Good," she whispered, she came back to the other women. "Listen," she said, speaking low and quickly, "I have been to the Palace, great things are doing there. The Prince has been murdered," with an imperative gesture she silenced the cries of astonishment; "as yet it is not known to the Government. The white men are there, caught in the Garden Palace, whither they went to find out the death, and the bazaar folk have gone out against them to slay them. The morning will show." She turned to the door and swung it open, faint lines of light were beginning to show in the sky. "The bazaar folk are mad," she went on, "they think that by slaying three

white men they will overthrow the British Raj. Are there not millions of white folk to take the place of these ? Even now the regiment marches from Dinapore, in two hours it will be at the Palace gates.” She turned from the door again, but left it open. “ We will not act till morning,” she said, “ the woman is safe till then ; if the white men win, who knows, there may be money to be got by us for having thus saved her. Meanwhile I would rest, mother.”

It was a sign of dismissal, the rest of the women obeyed meekly, not sorry on the whole to be off to their own homes and hear more of these marvellous tidings.

Maham closed the door carefully behind them ; through her half-shut eyes Esther watched the easy latch dropped into position, then the old woman shuffled across the floor and picking up the cloth her daughter had jerked aside, spread it across the small body again.

“ Poor little white babe,” she muttered, “ he had the makings of a fine man.”

The younger woman had thrown aside her outer coverings and lain down on the second charpoy the room contained. Her mother glanced at her as she moved about the hut preparatory to putting the light out and seeking a little well-earned repose on her own account. “ ’Tis always money with you,” she murmured half to herself ; “ one day it will bring trouble, there is a curse on such gold.”

“ Lie down and cease chattering, old fool,” her daughter called to her sharply. “ I at least wish to sleep before dawn. Much of the gold goes to feed thy belly,” she added as an afterthought.

"I take not much feeding," the other retorted, "nor do I see much of thy gold. But get thee to thy sleep, I am too old to quarrel with."

She paused a minute by Esther's apparently unconscious form, touching the face gently to feel it still warm, and placing a bowl of water within reach, then having extinguished the light she found her own corner of the room and curled herself up on the floor.

Darkness and silence held the hut, darkness so intense that Esther's eyes, wide open now, could see nothing wherever she stared, and silence so heavy that it seemed to her as if her own heart beat out its summons to life like a loud drum, and she was afraid its noise would keep awake the other two women whom she was so anxious should sleep. For she had made up her mind now there would be no shirking of the path through fear, not now that she had this other life to act for. Once they both slept she would slip from her bed over to that form they had laid on the floor and then, with the baby close held against her heart, she would creep to the door and so out, out into the world that she had seen faintly outlined through the open door. She had no knowledge where she was, but it was not the harem, that much she knew, and outside lay freedom. Mother love should give her the courage she had lacked through all these months, she would win through and make her way to the Resident's house; somehow she never doubted that.

Maham turned restless, and Esther held her breath; the younger woman at any rate was snoring by now. Would this other never sleep? For endless minutes so it seemed to Esther-she lay and listened till at last it

appeared to her that both the women slept, then gathering all her strength together, she slid from the bed and stood upright. It was strange how strong she felt, purpose was driving her forward, brain had for the time completely swamped body. She moved unerringly through the dark, and kneeling down pushed away the covering from the small body, gathering the baby, with arms that trembled a little, but not through weakness, close to her. Its contact, cold, inert and strangely heavy, struck chill to her heart, but she held it very closely, putting aside her own covering so that the warmth of her body might warm it, and it seemed to her that the chill left it, it grew softer, almost moved a little in her arms. Without waiting for more, the little baby close covered and held against her heart, she made for the door, its fastenings proving easy work under her eager hands, and so out into the world.

She paused to swing the door to behind her, for dawn was noticeable in the outside world, she feared it might wake the two women ; then not knowing where she went, only wildly grateful that no walls lay round her, she turned and hurried quickly from the spot.

Before she knew it almost, she was free from the little village and beyond the shelter of the grove of trees, wide level ricefields just sprouting green after the first rains lay all round her, some little distance off she could see the jungles of Bholpur. Then the white walls of the Palace, just touched on by the first streak of light, dawned on her eyes, with huddled close against them the native town and away a little to the left another square white building standing on its own in a wide patch of garden. That must be the Residency, she thought—what had Ishaq

Khan said, not near but near enough to be unsafe. She would go there, cutting straight across the fields to it, it was not far, nor would it take her long.

She started the journey almost running, but stumbled painfully once or twice, and conscious of the fact that she must husband her strength if she were to reach her goal, slowed down to a walk. Great masses of clouds, heralded by bursts of thunder, were spreading over the skies, obliterating the first faint efforts of the sun. As Esther stumbled her way over the fields, the concealing saree dragged across her head and shoulders, the first drops of rain started to splash round her, soaking through her draperies. Frightened for her burden, for even now her benumbed senses refused to realize that the babe was dead, and terrified lest in seeking shelter she might risk detection, she staggered on till she came at last to a disused cattle shed standing in the corner of one of the fields. Here at least was shelter of a sort and she had the place to herself, so well nigh exhausted she stumbled in and lay down, pillowing the baby's head on her arm.

Outside the storm raved and shrieked and splashed, turning the fields into swamps and the paths into running streams.

* * * * *

"The monsoon has broken with a vengeance on purpose to welcome you," McDermot explained to Mrs. Hamilton as he greeted her and her husband on the station platform. Then he turned to Hamilton. "You have arrived in the nick of time," he said, "though this necessity was not in my mind when I wrote you. We

have just been through a stormy episode, and incidentally Prince Ishaq Khan has been murdered."

"Prince Ishaq Khan dead?" Marjorie interrupted, she stood between the two men, her hand on her husband's arm, her eyes on McDermot, "then——"

"Then," answered McDermot, his eyes met hers gravely, "it is left to us to find Mrs. Gerald Hamilton and make her what reparation we can. That is why I sent for you."

CHAPTER XXX

"As for us, we are led, with none to deliver us, by the deeds we have done, into the Halls of Death."—*From an old Jain Poet.*

MRS. HAMILTON turned from the window where she had been standing watching the steady downpour of the rain and moved aimlessly about the room. She was oppressed with a sense of tragedy in the air and the monsoon downpour outside did not assist towards cheerfulness. The men had been out all day, firstly on business at the Palace, for there, though matters had more or less quieted down, there was much to be arranged and settled, but incidentally she knew that the search for Esther had in no way slackened, any moment might bring news of her, and Mrs. Hamilton had spent the day in waiting and thinking. They had talked it all out with McDermot and Brown, Jack had explained his action and Brown at any rate had agreed in the wisdom of the course that had been taken. McDermot blamed, it would seem, himself more than any one else, but after their first meeting he never looked directly at Mrs. Hamilton and she had a feeling that she had lost a friendship she had not valued lightly. Dr. Crow had been wired for and was expected to arrive next day, Mrs. Hamilton would have liked to send for Gerald, but this even McDermot was unwilling to do. He realized quite well what the disclosure would mean between the

brothers, and as Brown constantly reminded him, there was no need to make that breach until they were absolutely certain of their facts. It was decided, therefore, to wait until Esther was found before anything should be done to enlighten Gerald. Meanwhile how slowly the hours crept by, would news never come ? the day was nearly over and night would mean another delay. Mrs. Hamilton decided she would send for the lamps, for the room had already gathered shadows, and try and read. Dr. Brown had offered her his supply of books, perhaps there was one among them that would be sufficient to occupy her thoughts.

Mary Ann, placid and unruffled, came in answer to her summons. Yes, she would ask Rutna for lamps ; Rutna was an exceedingly good and capable servant, he had been telling Mary Ann many things about last night's happenings, would the memsahib care to hear ?

No, Mrs. Hamilton would not.

She picked up a book at random as soon as the lamps were brought and settled herself down to read, with a determination not to think. But it was altogether useless, her thoughts would wander. What would Gerald think of it all when he should know, how would she face the scorn and anger in his eyes ? Above the sound of the rain she was conscious of the servants' voices in the back verandah, apparently a discussion of some sort was going on, for raised above the rest she could hear Joseph's pompous voice laying down the law. Joseph was the Hamiltons' headman and at the same time John's valet, an excellent servant, but with an unfortunate habit of making himself unpleasant to other people's domestics. She would have to go out and interfere, she supposed,

he was evidently, in the absence of his sahib, making himself very offensive. As she had expected, when she reached the back door she could see the group of servants gathered together under the light of a swinging lantern hung from the beams of the verandah.

Joseph's portly figure towered amongst the rest, but his tirade, Mrs. Hamilton noticed, was not being addressed to them, but rather to a wretched figure that crouched shivering on the steps outside in the rain.

"Joseph," Mrs. Hamilton called sharply, her voice causing some commotion to the group, "what on earth do you mean by making all this noise out here?"

Joseph's demeanour remained unruffled, he never suffered from any idea of wrongdoing. "This woman," he turned in dignified explanation, "is most troublesome, memsahib, she will not go away, nor yet explain what it is she wants. Only she asks speech with the Resident sahib—can such a thing be possible?"

Speech with the Resident—perhaps here was the message they had waited all day for? Mrs. Hamilton moved quickly to the steps and at her approach the crouching figure drew itself upright, whispering something, though Mrs. Hamilton could not catch the words.

"I will speak to the woman," she said on an impulse, "tell her to follow me."

"Memsahib," Joseph ventured, even his dignity a little shaken, "it is impossible, she is of the lowest caste, a bad woman of the bazaars."

"Be quiet," Mrs. Hamilton commanded, "and do as I tell you." She turned to lead the way, and the gliding form under Joseph's outraged eyes gathered her garments close round her and followed.

At the door of the sitting-room the woman paused, almost as if meditating flight, then with a little choking cry she clutched at the saree enveloping her, tearing it away from face and form. So she stood swaying a little, the light caught and reflected in her halo of golden hair, one arm holding something to her heart, then, with the other hand outstretched, attempting even in that moment to shield the thing she carried, she fell forward to the floor at Mrs. Hamilton's feet.

From nearly the first moment Marjorie had guessed who the woman was, when the light shone on her head certainty could be denied no longer, yet she stood passive, gazing down at the outstretched figure, only conscious of great waves of repulsion as she looked. It was left to Mary Ann to run forward and kneel by Esther's side.

"It is the white miss sahib," she whispered, scarce above her breath, "white has come back to white at the last."

Marjorie came to herself with a shock of horror at her own hardness, white had come back to white—had she no better welcome for her than that?

Meanwhile Mary Ann had turned the body over with deft hands, pushing aside the wet clinging clothes, and as Marjorie watched pity stiffened once more to horror in her heart, for she saw what the ayah had found and was loosening from the woman's clasp.

Mary Ann looked up from her task and call'd her attention softly.

"See, memsahib," she said, "without doubt God must have given her strength to come, the babe is newborn, and dead, quite dead."

Marjorie forced herself to look at the upheld bundle.

Stiff and calm, the face unlike a baby's since the majesty of Death sat enthroned thereon, every feature perfect, the little lips drooping slightly at the corners, for he had cried just once before he died and the memory of it had gone with him into death, and white, marble whiteness all over save for the gold-shadowed down on his head and the faintly traced eyebrows. It was Gerald's face set in frozen miniature, now at last Marjorie understood, and the floodgates of her pity were open to Esther.

Together she and Mary Ann, laying aside the other piteous burden for awhile, since they could do nothing for it, lifted Esther and carried her into the bedroom, changing the dirty native clothes for a soft nightgown, washing the poor tired face and body, brushing out the golden hair. The girl showed no sign of life, under their hands—except that her breath still came and went, and once she moaned very faintly just one word, Marjorie scarcely heard it, but to her it sounded like "Gerald."

All had been done that could be done for her comfort before the men came back, and since she still lay in the same unconscious state Marjorie left Mary Ann in charge and went out to meet them herself.

"She has come back," she said, going straight up to her husband. "Jack, we must send for Gerald."

Jack put an arm round her, he could see she was very near tears.

"You mean?" he asked, but McDermot was before him.

"She has reached us then," he said; "thank God for that. Where is she, Mrs. Hamilton?"

"In my room," Marjorie explained. "Mary Ann and I have done all we can for her; I am afraid it is of no use,

she seems to be dying." Jack felt her shiver and drew her a little closer to him.

Brown, who had joined the group, spoke.

"Will you take me to her," he asked, "I may be able to help."

"Yes," agreed McDermot: he turned as if to lead the way, but Marjorie moved from her husband's arm in front of them.

"Wait," she said, "there is something else you must all know, there has been a baby, it must have been born last night or this morning, she has come some long distance, through the rain, carrying it quite dead against her heart. Mary Ann says it has never really lived. I think that is why she came, Jack," she appeared in some odd way to be pleading with her husband, "Heaven knows how she found the strength, but I think she must have wanted above everything else to bring it back to us, because it is in some sort of way ours, it is quite white. Oh, Jack, Jack," her voice broke, she moved to him blindly for the tears in her eyes, "don't you see, can't you understand, it is Gerald's baby, she wanted to bring it back to Gerald."

Jack Hamilton drew his wife into his arms, hushing her sobs against his coat. "Yes, dear, yes, of course I understand," he whispered, "don't fret so over it, Marjorie, for God's sake, you aren't in any sort of way to blame."

"But you will send for Gerald at once," Marjorie begged, "at once, before it is too late for her."

"We will see what Brown and McDermot think," Jack promised; "you may be very sure whatever seems best shall be done."

Brown, once he had seen the patient, came to a very quick conclusion, she would not live, probably not even until the morning, anyway she had already been through sufficient to kill ten women of the same constitution as herself. He looked too at the other white small figure and whistled sharply through his teeth as he looked, Brown's customary method of concealing any depths of feeling. Then he rejoined McDermot on the verandah. The Hamiltons had gone to their own rooms, the Resident was alone.

"Well?" he asked abruptly, turning to face Brown.

"She can't last till morning," Brown answered simply, "there is nothing I, or any one else, could do to help her."

"Has she suffered—much?" asked McDermot. His voice sounded strained and Brown, glancing at him noticed how haggard and old his face looked.

"She probably didn't feel much," he prevaricated, of what use to torture the man further, "in cases of this sort after a certain period numbness and partial loss of feeling sets in. She must have chanced here blindly, good luck more than any purpose I should think."

"And the baby?" asked McDermot.

"Oh, dead. Just lived enough to be born and then died, I fancy." He paused and glanced uncomfortably at his companion. "Just as well, isn't it?" he ventured.

McDermot turned from him, his eyes came suddenly upon the white cross that marked the English girl's grave in the garden. "You mean when they are both dead the thing need go no further," he said. "Like Hamilton, you are still keen to save the scandal. Oh,

yes, it is just as well," his voice rang bitterly, " that we should all have waited till it was too late to help her and thus saved a scandal."

Whatever might be McDermot's feelings on the matter Dr. Brown and Jack Hamilton were at least unanimous in their decision. Gerald was not to be sent for : of what use could it be, they argued, since the girl would certainly not live to see him even. They were left to manage it their own way finally, for McDermot retired from the discussion, and Marjorie acquiesced. She sat up the night with Esther, and towards morning, bending over the bed to arrange the sheets, became aware of the fact that the girl's eyes were wide open and staring at her. No surprise or fright showed in them, only it seemed as if they looked for something and were disappointed at not finding it. Marjorie caught her breath sharply and knelt by the bed, putting warm hands on Esther's immovable fingers. The girl's lips moved ; as once before Marjorie just caught the barely sounded word.

" Gerald ! " Esther asked : her eyes moved from Marjorie's round the room.

" He is not here," Marjorie attempted to explain, " he is back with his regiment in Quetta, you know, he has not even heard that we have found you yet."

" He has not come," the girl answered.

The hopeless disappointment in her voice brought the tears to Marjorie's eyes, she would have spoken again but Esther had looked away from her. " I would like to see Mr. McDermot," she said.

Marjorie stumbled to her feet, she felt herself to be useless, and not wanted by the dying girl, and knew the

knowledge to be deserved. She would have left McDermot and Esther alone when he came, but the Resident stopped her.

"I would rather you stayed," he said, so once more she knelt by the bed, hiding her face in her hands.

Esther turned at McDermot's voice, her eyes searching his face.

"I have made a mistake in coming back," she said, her voice so low he had to stoop to catch the words, "I wonder will you understand. I hoped—" her breath came quickly—"Gerald seemed to understand while he loved me, but now—he has not come—there is no more forgiveness in his heart, he will never know how much I longed for his love to close round me again, just once before I had to die——"

Her words failed, McDermot standing stiffly by the bed, his hands clenched at his sides, looked across to Marjorie.

"Are you not going to tell [her the truth," he asked, "is not so much due to her from you ? "

Marjorie lifted her head. "Yes, oh yes," she said. She put out her hand and touched Esther's timidly. "Listen," she said, "and if you can, forgive me. Gerald thinks you are dead, he was ill the night you left, very ill, we thought he would die. Then my husband and Dr. Crow arranged to give out that you had died of cholera, and they told Gerald. He believed them, he believes them still, that is why we have not sent for him. If he knew he would never forgive us, for he loved you, better than life or honour, he loved you, Esther——" her voice broke, she buried her face in her hands and commenced to sob.

Esther's eyes turned slowly from the bowed head to McDermot's stern white face.

"I am glad," she whispered, "so glad. You don't know how terrible it was to feel that he had failed me." Sudden fear woke in her eyes, she struggled to a sitting position. "What have you done with the baby?" she asked. "You must give it back to me, we will go away together and Gerald will never know, he can go on thinking of me as dead." Her figure swayed, she fell back against the pillows.

Marjorie rose to her feet, her eyes besought McDermot for assistance, but as if Esther read their message, she intervened.

"It doesn't very much matter after all," she whispered. "I remember now, the baby died, I couldn't keep him warm, though I tried, and I am dying too, isn't that why you didn't send for Gerald. He need never know now, promise me no one shall tell him, promise me!"

"I promise," said McDermot, he leant forward and his eyes met Marjorie's. "I promise you, Mrs. Hamilton, that your memory shall be quite safe with me."

Esther's story ends here, an incorrect finish from the fiction point of view, but death throws up immovable barriers even in the land of make-belief. And for Esther and her baby there could have been no "happy ever after." They are safer as they are, lying side by side in the shade of the other white girl's tomb in the Residency garden at Bholpur. There is no mound or mark above Esther's grave, the ground has been stamped flat, no flowers have been planted on it, only the jessamine that

runs riot over the other tomb drops its blossoms here as well and the roses have thrown out roots and taken sweet possession of it. When the sun drops down behind the Bholpur forest, the white cross on the other grave flings a shadow across Esther's resting-place. That is how McDermot, though he is in no sense of the word a religious man, likes to think of her, under the shadow of the white cross. Otherwise Esther's memory is safe, as he promised her it should be in his keeping. Not even the bazaar folk know of that second grave in the Resident's garden, the story of the white woman who escaped from the harem of the Prince has become a fairy tale to be told with many strange additions round the village fires of a night.

And a new régime reigns in Bholpur, the principeship has been dispensed with, it was a troublesome state and Government has taken it over. A regiment is stationed there now which uses the old club-house as its headquarters, and quite a little society has sprung up round it. The Hamiltons have left India, he has retired to a really fat billet in the police of the home country, Marjorie has turned her back with joy upon India and all things Indian. Gerald has married again, little Miss Thomas, and is happy in the placid healthy way Gerald was meant for. He does not often think of Esther, because to remember things, especially sad things, is not a strong point in his character, but he will never quite forget her, because he loved Esther in a way he never dreams of loving his present wife. Brown has retired to his beloved Ireland, Donaldson is married and has been transferred to Burma.

Only the missionaries remain the same as ever, the Lyalls a little thinner, a little older, a little more reserved,

shrinking very much from the new society round them, and the Black Beetle unchangeable and unsociable as ever. And McDermot has his memories all to himself. The years pass and leave him much the same, a silent, strong man, very clever, but neither amusing nor sociable, the ladies of the station say.

So Esther's story, beginning with dust and death, ends in death and dust. Yet since the roses grow as sweet and wonderful from her dust as from the other girl's, it may be taken as a symbol that Death has levelled all things and wiped out the misdeeds of her life with an impartial hand—

“Nothing endures ; fair virtues fade with time,
Foul sins grow purged thereby.”

FINIS

